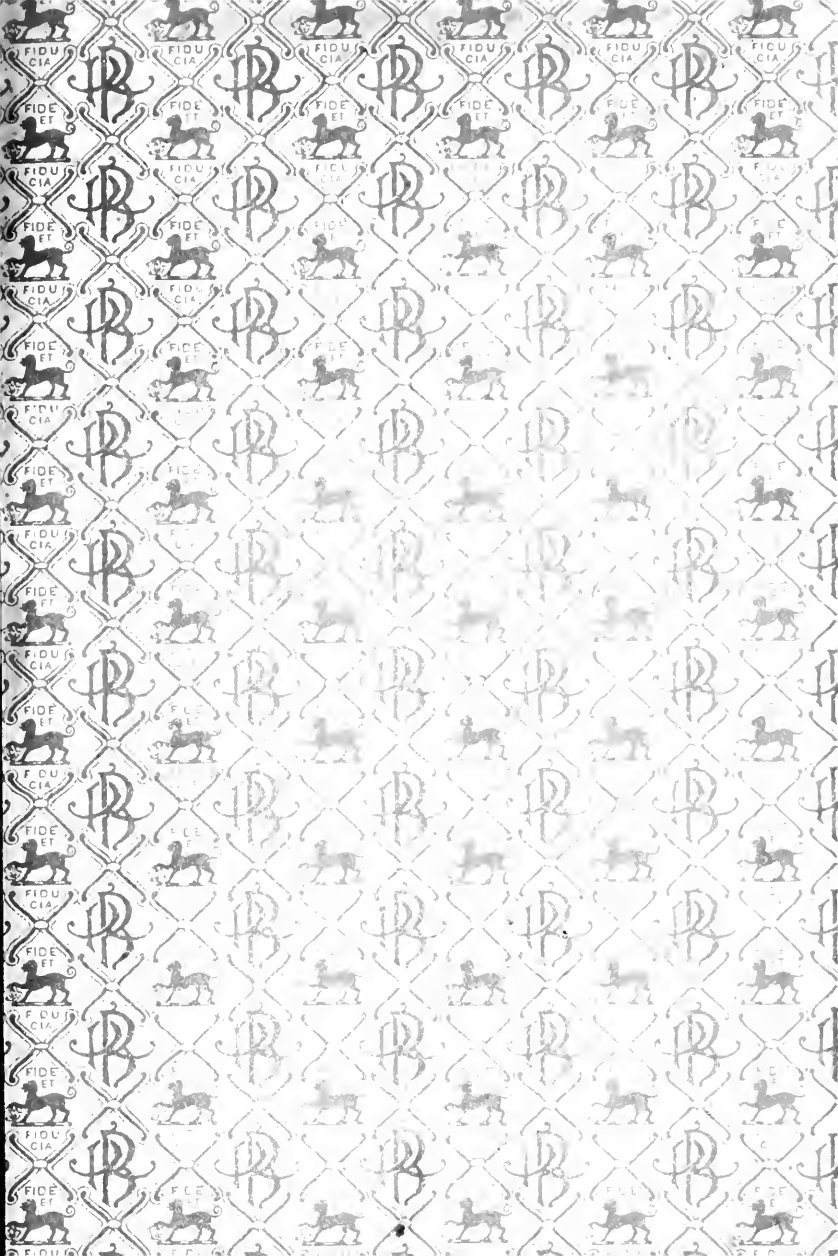


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THE EMANCIPATED

A Nobel

BY

GEORGE GISSING

AUTHOR OF "THE NETHER WORLD," "THYRZA," ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON:
RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON,

Publishers in Ordinary to Her Majesty the Queen.

1890.

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PART II.

(Continued.)



THE EMANCIPATED.

CHAPTER VI.

AT PÆSTUM.

THE English artist had finished his work, and the dirty little inn at Pæstum would to-day lose its solitary guest.

This morning he rose much later than usual, and strolled out idly into the spring sunshine, a rug thrown over his shoulder. Often plucking a flower or a leaf, and seeming to examine it with close thoughtfulness, he made a long circuit by the old walls; now and then he paused to take a view of the temples, always with eye of grave meditation. At one elevated point, he stood for several minutes looking along the road to Salerno.

March rains had brought the vegetation into luxurious life ; fern, acanthus, brambles, and all the densely intermingled growths that cover the ground about the ruins, spread forth their innumerable tints of green. Between shore and mountains, the wide plain smiled in its desolation.

At length he went up into the Temple of Neptune, spread the rug on a spot where he had been accustomed, each day at noon, to eat his salame and drink his Calabrian wine, and seated himself against a column. Here he could enjoy a view from both ends of the ruin. In the one direction it was only a narrow strip of sea, with the barren coast below, and the cloudless sky above it ; in the other, a purple valley, rising far away on the flank of the Apennines ; both pictures set between Doric pillars. He lit a cigar, and with a smile of contented thought abandoned himself to the delicious warmth, the restful silence. Within reach of his hand was a fern that had shot up between the massive stones ; he gently caressed its

fronds, as though it were a sentient creature. Or his eyes dwelt upon the huge column just in front of him—now scanning its superb proportions, now enjoying the hue of the sunny-golden travertine, now observing the myriad crevices of its time-eaten surface, the petrified forms of vegetable growth, the little pink snails that housed within its chinks.

Dear and glorious temples! sanctuaries still for all to whom poetry is religion. These stones, have they not echoed to Hellenic speech? When Latin worship had fled from them, when the Saracen had done his worst, when the Norman pirate had pillaged all he could to adorn his Christian church at Amalfi,—time and solitude became warders of what remained, hallowing the austere beauty of these abandoned fanes to be a monument of the world where gods and men walked together.

It was not an artistic impulse only that had brought Mallard to Italy, after three

years of work under northern skies. He wished to convince himself that his freedom was proof against memories revived on the very ground where he had suffered so intensely. He had put aside repeated invitations from the Spences, because of the doubt whether he could trust himself within sight of the Mediterranean. Liberty from oppressive thought he had long recovered ; the old zeal for labour was so strong in him that he found it difficult to imagine the mood in which he had bidden good-bye to his life's purposes. But there was always the danger lest that witch of the south should again overcome his will and lull him into impotence of vain regret. For such a long time he had believed that Italy was for ever closed against him, that the old delights were henceforth converted into a pain which memory must avoid. At length he resolved to answer his friends' summons, and meet them on their return from Sicily. They had wished to have him with them in Greece, but always his departure was post-

poned ; habits of solitude and characteristic diffidence kept him aloof as long as possible.

Yes, his health was sound enough. He had loitered about the familiar places in Naples ; he took the road by Pompeii to Sorrento, and over the hills to Amalfi ; and at each step he could smile with contemptuous pity for the self which he had out-lived. More than that. When he came hither three years ago, it was with the intention of doing certain definite work ; this purpose he now at last fulfilled, thus completing his revenge upon the by-gone obstacles, and reinstating himself in his own good opinion, as a man who did that which he set himself to do. At Amalfi he had made a number of studies which would be useful ; at Pæstum he had worked towards a picture, such a one as had from the first been in his mind. Yes, he was a sound man once more.

But we are not contented to accept time's healing and be simply grateful for it ; the

malady of modern thought constrains us to search out the reasons of what we have undergone, and pry into the processes of our deliverance. What was the significance of that love-madness—its meaning for him as a man and an artist? At this distance he reviewed it calmly, from first symptom to last, and tried to understand what its ultimate effect upon him had been. Was it mere calamity; an illness sent by unkind fate, and survived after long struggle; a sheer blank of wasted time? He could not discern that he was a stronger man for the trial; it had taught him nothing that he did not know before. And yet, though himself unaware of it, he had perhaps been in need of some such moral shock. It is the weakness of men who have a reasoned faith in themselves to be also more or less superstitious; in looking back on their lives, they are fond of interpreting everything that has befallen them as contributory to their development and advance.

Tempestuous love is for boys, who have

still to know themselves, and for poets, who can turn their suffering into song. But to him it meant only hindrance. Because he had been a prey to frantic desires, did he look upon earth's beauty with a clearer eye, or was his hand endowed with subtler craft? He saw no reason to suppose it. The misery of those first months of northern exile—his battling with fierce winds on sea and moorland and mountain, his grim vigils under stormy stars—had it given him new strength? Of body, perhaps; otherwise, he might have spent the time with decidedly more of satisfaction and profit.

Let it be accepted as one of the unavoidable ills of manhood—something that has to be gone through, like measles. But it had come disagreeably late. No doubt he had to thank the monastic habits of his life that it assailed him with such violence. That he had endured it, therein lay the happy assurance that it would not again trouble him.

If it be true that love ever has it in its

power to make or mar a man, this love that he had experienced was assuredly not of such quality. From the first his reason had opposed it, and now that it was all over he tried to rejoice at the circumstances which had made his desire vain. Herein he went a little beyond sincerity; yet there were arguments which, at all events, fortified his wish to see that everything was well. It was not mere perversity that in the beginning had warned him against thinking of Cecily as a possible wife for him. Had she betrayed the least inclination to love him, such considerations would have gone to the winds; he would have called the gods to witness that the one perfect woman on the earth was his. But the fact of her passionate self-surrender to Reuben Elgar, did it not prove that the possibilities of her nature were quite other than those which could have assured *his* happiness? To be sure, so young a girl is liable to wretched errors—but of that he would take no account; against that he resolutely closed his mind.

From Edward Spence he heard that she was delighting herself and others in a London season. Precisely ; this justified his forethought ; for this she was adapted. But as his wife nothing of the kind would have been within her scope. He knew himself too well. His notion of married life was inconsistent with that kind of pleasure. As his wife, perhaps she would have had no desire save to fit herself to him. Possibly ; but that again was a reflection not to be admitted. He had only to deal with facts. Sufficient that he could think of her without a pang, that he could even hope to meet her again before long. And, best of all, no ungenerous feeling ever tempted him to wish her anything but wholly happy.

Stretched lazily in the Temple of Neptune, he once or twice looked at his watch, as though the hour in some way concerned him. How it did was at length shown. He heard voices approaching, and had just time to rise to his feet before there appeared figures, rising between the columns of the entrance

against the background of hills. He moved forward, a bright smile on his face. The arrivals were Edward Spence, with his wife and Mrs. Baske.

All undemonstrative people, they shook hands much as if they had parted only a week ago.

“Done your work?” asked Spence, laying his palm on one of the pillars, with affectionate greeting.

“All I can do here.”

“Can we see it?” Eleanor inquired.

“I’ve packed it for travelling.”

Mallard took the first opportunity of looking with scrutiny at Mrs. Baske. Alone of the three, she was changed noticeably. Her health had so much improved that, if anything, she looked younger; certainly her face had more distinct beauty. Reserve and conscious dignity were still its characteristics—these were inseparable from the mould of feature; but her eyes no longer had the somewhat sullen gleam which had been wont to harm her aspect, and when

she smiled it was without the hint of disdainful reticence. Yet the smile was not frequent; her lips had an habitual melancholy, and very often she knitted her brows in an expression of troubled thought. Whilst the others were talking with Mallard, she kept slightly in the rear, and seemed to be occupied in examining the different parts of the temple.

In attire she was transformed. No suggestion now of the lady from provincial England. She was very well, because most fittingly, dressed; neither too youthfully, nor with undue disregard of the fact that she was still young; a travelling-costume apt to the season and the country.

“They speak much of Signor Mallard at the osteria,” said Spence. “Your departure afflicts them, naturally, no doubt. Do you know whether any other Englishman ever braved that accommodation?”

A country lad appeared, carrying a small hamper, wherein the party had brought their midday meal from Salerno.

"Why did you trouble?" said Mallard. "We have cheese and salame in abundance."

"So I supposed," Spence replied drily. "I recall the quality of both. Also the *vino di Calabria*, which is villanously sweet. Show us what point of view you chose."

For an hour they walked and talked. Miriam alone was almost silent, but she paid constant attention to the ruins. Mallard heard her say something to Eleanor about the difference between the columns of the middle temple and those of the so-called Basilica; three years ago, such a remark would have been impossible on her lips, and when he glanced at her with curiosity, she seemed conscious of his look.

They at length opened the hamper, and seated themselves near the spot where Mallard had been reclining.

"There's a smack of profanity in this," said Spence. "The least we can do is to pour a libation to Poseidon, before we begin the meal."

And he did so, filling a tumbler with wine and solemnly emptying half of it on to the floor of the *cella*. Mallard watched the effect on Mrs. Baske; she met his look for an instant and smiled, then relapsed into thoughtfulness.

The only other visitors to-day were a couple of Germans, who looked like artists and went about in enthusiastic talk; one kept dealing the other severe blows on the chest, which occasionally made the recipient stagger—all in pure joy and friendship. They measured some of the columns, and in one place, for a special piece of observation, the smaller man mounted on his companion's shoulders. Miriam happened to see them whilst they were thus posed, and the spectacle struck her with such ludicrous effect that she turned away to disguise sudden laughter. In doing so, she by chance faced Mallard, and he too began to laugh. For the first time since they had been acquainted, they looked into each other's eyes with frank, hearty merriment. Miriam speedily con-

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trolled herself, and there came a flush to her cheeks.

"You may laugh," said Spence, observing them, "but when did you see two Englishmen abroad who did themselves so much honour?"

"True enough," replied Mallard. "One supposes that Englishmen with brains are occasionally to be found in Italy, but I don't know where they hide themselves."

"You will meet one in Rome in a few days," remarked Eleanor, "if you go on with us—as I hope you intend to?"

"Yes, I shall go with you to Rome. Who is the man?"

"Mr. Seaborne—your most reverent admirer."

"Ah, I should like to know the fellow."

Miriam looked at him and smiled.

"You know Mr. Seaborne?" he inquired of her, abruptly.

"He was with us a fortnight in Athens."

As they were idling about, after their lunch, Mallard kept near to Miriam, but

without speaking. He saw her stoop to pick up a piece of stone ; presently another. She glanced at him.

“Bits of Pæstum,” he said, smiling ; “perhaps of Poseidonia. Look at the field over there, where the oxen are ; they have walled it in with fragments dug up out of the earth,—the remnants of a city.”

She just bent her head, in sign of sympathy. A minute or two after, she held out to him the two stones she had taken up.

“How cold one is, and how warm the other !”

One was marble, one travertine. Mallard held them for a moment, and smiled assent ; then gave them back to her. She threw them away.

When it was time to think of departure, they went to the inn ; Mallard’s baggage was brought out and put into the carriage. They drove across the silent plain towards Salerno. In a pause of his conversation with Spence, Mallard drew Miriam’s atten-

tion to the unfamiliar shape of Capri, as seen from this side of the Sorrento promontory. She looked, and murmured an affirmative.

“You have been to Amalfi?” he asked.

“Yes; we went last year.”

“I hope you hadn’t such a day as your brother and I spent there—incessant pouring rain.”

“No; we had perfect weather.”

At Salerno they caught a train which enabled them to reach Naples late in the evening. Mallard accompanied his friends to their hotel, and dined with them. As he and Spence were smoking together afterwards, the latter communicated some news which he had reserved for privacy.

“By-the-bye, we hear that Cecily and her aunt are at Florence, and are coming to Rome next week.”

“Elgar with them?” Mallard asked, with nothing more than friendly interest.

“No. They say he is so hard at work that he couldn’t leave London.”

“What work?”

"The same I told you of last year."

Mallard regarded him with curious inquiry.

"His wife travels for her health?"

"She seems to be all right again, but Mrs. Lessingham judged that a change was necessary. Won't you use this opportunity of meeting her?"

"As it comes naturally, there's no reason why I shouldn't. In fact, I shall be glad to see her. But I should have preferred to meet them both together. What faith do you put in this same work of Elgar's?"

"That he *is* working, I take it there can be no doubt, and I await the results with no little curiosity. Mrs. Lessingham writes vaguely, which, by-the-bye, is not her habit. Whether she is a believer or not, we can't determine."

"Did the child's death affect him much?"

"I know nothing about it."

They smoked in silence for a few minutes. Then Mallard observed, without taking the cigar from his lips :

“How much better Mrs. Baske looks!”

“Naturally the change is more noticeable to you than to us. It has come very slowly. I dare say you see other changes as well?”

Spence's eye twinkled as he spoke.

“I was prepared for them. That she should stay abroad with you all this time is in itself significant. Where does she propose to live when you are back in England?”

“Why, there hasn't been a word said on the subject. Eleanor is waiting; doesn't like to ask questions. We shall have our house in Chelsea again, and she is very welcome to share it with us if she likes. I think it is certain she won't go back to Lancashire; and the notion of her living with the Elgars is improbable.”

“How far does the change go?” inquired Mallard, with hesitancy.

“I can't tell you, for we are neither of us in her confidence. But she is no longer a precisian. She has read a great deal; most of it reading of a very substantial

kind. Not at all connected with religion ; it would be a mistake to suppose that she has been going in for a course of modern criticism, and that kind of thing. The Greek and Latin authors she knows very fairly, in English or French translations. What would our friend Bradshaw say ? She has grappled with whole libraries of solid historians. She knows the Italian poets. Really, no common case of a woman educating herself at that age."

"Would you mind telling me what her age is ?"

"Twenty-seven, last February. To-day she has been mute ; generally, when we are in interesting places, she rather likes to show her knowledge—of course we encourage her to do so. A blessed form of vanity, compared with certain things one remembers !"

"She looks as if she had by no means conquered peace of mind," observed Mallard, after another silence.

"I don't suppose she has. I don't

even know whether she's on the way to it."

"How about the chapel at Bartles?"

Spence shook his head and laughed, and the dialogue came to an end.

The next morning all started for Rome.





CHAPTER VII.

LEARNING AND TEACHING.

EASTER was just gone by. The Spences had timed their arrival in Rome so as to be able to spend a few days with certain friends, undisturbed by bell-clanging and the rush of trippers, before at length returning to England. Their hotel was in the Babuino. Mallard, who was uncertain about his movements during the next month or two, went to quarters with which he was familiar in the Via Bocca di Leone. He brought his Pæstum picture to the hotel, but declined to leave it there. Mallard was deficient in those properties of the showman which are so necessary to an artist if he would make his work widely known and sell it for substantial sums; he hated anything like private exhibition, and dreaded an offer to

purchase from any one who had come in contact with him by the way of friendly introduction.

“I’m not satisfied with it, now I come to look at it again. It’s nothing but a rough sketch.”

“But Seaborne will be here this afternoon,” urged Spence. “He will be grateful if you let him see it.”

“If he cares to come to my room, he shall.”

Miriam made no remark on the picture, but kept looking at it as long as it was uncovered. The temples stood in the light of early morning, a wonderful, indescribable light, perfectly true and rendered with great skill.

“Is it likely to be soon sold?” she asked, when the artist had gone off with his canvas.

“As likely as not, he’ll keep it by him for a year or two, till he hates it for a few faults that no one else can perceive or be taught to understand,” was Spence’s reply.

“ I wish I could somehow become possessed of it. But if I hinted such a wish, he would insist on my taking it as a present. An impracticable fellow, Mallard. He suspects I want to sell it for him ; that’s why he won’t leave it. And if Seaborne goes to his room, ten to one he’ll be received with growls of surly independence.”

This Mr. Seaborne was a man of letters. Spence had made his acquaintance in Rome a year ago ; they conversed casually in Piale’s reading-room, and Seaborne happened to say that the one English landscape-painter who strongly interested him was a little-known man, Ross Mallard. His own work was mostly anonymous ; he wrote for one of the quarterlies and one of the weekly reviews. He was a little younger than Mallard, whom in certain respects he resembled ; he had much the same way of speaking, the same reticence with regard to his own doings, even a slight similarity of feature, and his life seemed to be rather a lonely one.

When the two met, they behaved precisely as Spence predicted they would—with reserve, almost with coldness. For all that, Seaborne paid a visit to the artist's room, and in a couple of hours' talk they arrived at a fair degree of mutual understanding. The next day they smoked together in an odd abode occupied by the literary man near Porto di Ripetta, and thenceforth were good friends.

The morning after that, Mallard went early to the Vatican. He ascended the Scala Regia, and knocked at the little red door over which is written, "Cappella Sistina." On entering, he observed only a gentleman and a young girl, who stood in the middle of the floor, consulting their guide-book; but when he had taken a few steps forward, he saw a lady come from the far end and seat herself to look at the ceiling through an opera-glass. It was Mrs. Baske, and he approached whilst she was still intent on the frescoes. The pausing of his footstep close to her caused her to put down the

glass and regard him. Mallard noticed the sudden change from cold remoteness of countenance to pleased recognition. The brightening in her eyes was only for a moment ; then she smiled in her usual half-absent way, and received him formally.

“ You are not alone ? ” he said, taking a place by her as she resumed her seat.

“ Yes, I have come alone. ” And, after a pause, she added, “ We don’t think it necessary always to keep together. That would become burdensome. I often leave them, and go to places by myself. ”

Her look was still turned upwards. Mallard followed its direction.

“ Which of the Sibyls is your favourite ? ” ^{ما كنت أعرفها} he asked.

At once she indicated the Delphic, but without speaking.

“ Mine too. ”

Both fixed their eyes upon the figure, and were silent.

“ You have been here very often ? ” were Mallard’s next words.

"Last year very often."

"From genuine love of it, or a sense of duty?" he asked, examining her face.

She considered before replying.

"Not only from a sense of duty, though of course I have felt that. I don't *love* anything of Michael Angelo's, but I am compelled to look and study. I came here this morning only to refresh my memory of one of those faces"—she pointed to the lower part of the Last Judgment—"and yet the face is dreadful to me."

She found that he was smiling, and abruptly she added the question:

"Do you love that picture?"

"Why, no; but I often delight in it. I wouldn't have it always before me (for that matter, no more would I have the things that I love). A great work of art may be painful at all times, and sometimes unendurable."

"I have learnt to understand that," she said, with something of humility, which came upon Mallard as new and agreeable.

"But—it is not long since that scene represented a reality to me. I think I shall never see it as you do."

Mallard wished to look at her, but did not.

"I have sometimes been repelled by a feeling of the same kind," he answered. "Not that I myself ever thought of it as a reality, but I have felt angry and miserable in remembering that a great part of the world does. You see the pretty girl there, with her father. I noticed her awed face as I passed, and heard a word or two of the man's, which told me that for them there was no question of *art*. Poor child! I should have liked to pat her hand, and tell her to be good and have no fear."

"Did Michael Angelo believe it?" Miriam asked diffidently, when she had glanced with anxious eyes at the pair of whom he spoke.

"I suppose so. And yet I am far from sure. What about Dante? Haven't you sometimes stumbled over his grave assur-

ances that this and that did really befall him? Putting aside the feeble notion that he was a deluded visionary, how does one reconcile the artist's management of his poem with the Christian's stern faith? In any case, he was more poet than Christian when he wrote. Milton makes no such claims; he merely prays for the enlightenment of his imagination."

Miriam turned from the great fresco, and again gazed at the Sibyls and Prophets.

"Do the Stanze interest you?" was Mallard's next question.

"Very little, I am sorry to say. They soon weary me."

"And the Loggia?"

"I never paid much attention to it."

"That surprises me. Those little pictures are my favourites of all Raphael's work. For those and the Psyche, I would give everything else."

Miriam looked at him inquiringly.

"Are you again thinking of the subjects?" he asked.

“Yes. I can’t help it. I have avoided them, because I knew how impossible it was for me to judge them only as art.”

“Then you have the same difficulty with nearly all Italian pictures?”

She hesitated; but, without turning her eyes to him, said at length:

“I can’t easily explain to you the distinction there is for me between the Old Testament and the New. I was taught almost exclusively out of the Old—at least, it seems so to me. I have had to study the New for myself, and it helps rather than hinders my enjoyment of pictures taken from it. The religion of my childhood was one of bitterness and violence and arbitrary judgment and hatred.”

“Ah, but there is quite another side to the Old Testament—those parts of it, at all events, that are illustrated up in the Loggia. Will you come up there with me?”

She rose without speaking. They left the chapel, and ascended the stairs.

“You are not under the impression,” he said, with a smile, as they walked side by side, “that the Old Testament is responsible for those horrors we have just been speaking of?”

“They are in *that* spirit. My reading of the New omits everything of the kind.”

“So does mine. But we have no justification.”

“We can select what is useful to us, and reject what does harm.”

“Yes; but then——”

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He did not finish the sentence, and they went into the pictured Loggia. Here, choosing out his favourites, Mallard endeavoured to explain all his joy in them. He showed her how it was Hebrew history made into a series of exquisite and touching legends; he dwelt on the sweet, idyllic treatment, the lovely landscape, the tender idealism throughout, the perfect adaptedness of gem-like colouring—though that, of course, is not Raphael's hand. Jacob meeting Rachel at the well; Joseph telling his

dream ; the meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek — how the essence of pastoral poetry is expressed in those groups ! 256

Miriam endeavoured to see with his eyes, but did not pretend to be wholly successful. The very names were discordant to her ear.

“ I will buy some photographs of them to take away,” she said.

“ Don’t do that ; they are useless. Colour and design are here inseparable.”

They stayed not more than half an hour ; then left the Vatican together, and walked to the front of St. Peter’s in silence. Mallard looked at his watch.

“ You are going back to the hotel ? ”

“ I suppose so.”

“ Shall I call one of those carriages ?—I am going to have a walk on to the Janiculum.”

She glanced at the sky.

“ There will be a fine view to-day.”

“ You wouldn’t care to come so far ? ”

“ Yes, I should enjoy the walk.”

“To walk? It would tire you too much.”

“Oh no!” replied Miriam, looking away and smiling. “You mustn’t think I am what I was that winter at Naples. I can walk a good many miles, and only feel better for it.”

Her tone amused him, for it became something like that of a child in self-defence when accused of some childlike incapacity.

“Then let us go, by all means.”

They turned into the Borgo San Spirito, and then went by the quiet Longara. Mallard soon found that it was necessary to moderate his swinging stride. He was not in the habit of walking with ladies, and he felt ashamed of himself when a glance told him that his companion was put to overmuch exertion. The glance led him to observe Miriam’s gait; its grace and refinement gave him a sudden sensation of keen pleasure. He thought, without wishing to do so, of Cecily; her matchless, maidenly charm in movement

was something of quite another kind. Mrs. Baske trod the common earth, yet with, it seemed to him, a dignity that distinguished her from ordinary women.

There had been silence for a long time. They were alike in the custom of forgetting what had last been said, or how long since.

“Do you care for sculpture?” Mallard asked, led to the inquiry by his thoughts of form and motion.

“Yes; but not so much as for painting.”

He noticed a reluctance in her voice, and for a moment was quite unconscious of the reason for it. But reflection quickly explained her slight embarrassment.

“Edward makes it one of his chief studies,” she added at once, looking straight before her. “He has told me what to read about it.”

Mallard let the subject fall. But presently they passed a yoke of oxen drawing a cart, and, as he paused to look at them, he said:

“Don’t you like to watch those animals ? I can never be near them without stopping. Look at their grand heads, their horns, their majestic movement ! They always remind me of the antique—of splendid power fixed in marble. These are the kind of oxen that Homer saw, and Virgil.”

Miriam gazed, but said nothing.

“Does your silence mean that you can’t sympathize with me ?”

“No. It means that you have given me a new way of looking at a thing ; and I have to think.”

She paused ; then, with a curious inflection of her voice, as though she were not quite certain of the tone she wished to strike, whether playful or sarcastic :

“You wouldn’t prefer me to make an exclamation ?”

He laughed.

“Decidedly not. If you were apt to do so, I should not be expressing my serious thoughts.”

The pleasant mood continued with him,

and, a smile still on his face, he asked presently :

“Do you remember telling me that you thought I was wasting my life on futilities?”

Miriam flushed, and for an instant he thought he had offended her. But her reply corrected this impression.

“You admitted, I think, that there was much to be said for my view.”

“Did I? Well, so there is. But the same conviction may be reached by very different paths. If we agreed in that one result, I fancy it was the sole and singular point of concord.”

Miriam inquired diffidently :

“Do you still think of most things just as you did then?”

“Of most things, yes.”

“You have found no firmer hope in which to work?”

“Hope? I am not sure that I understand you.”

He looked her in the face, and she said hurriedly :

“Are you still as far as ever from satisfying yourself? Does your work bring you nothing but a comparative satisfaction?”

“I am conscious of having progressed an inch or two on the way of infinity,” Mallard replied. “That brings me no nearer to an end.”

“But you *have* a purpose; you follow it steadily. It is much to be able to say that.”

“Do you mean it for consolation?”

“Not in any sense that you need resent,” Miriam gave answer, a little coldly.

“I felt no resentment. But I should like to know what sanction of a life’s effort you look for, now? We talked once, perhaps you remember, of one kind of work being ‘higher’ than another. How do you think now on that subject?”

She made delay before saying:

“It is long since I thought of it at all. I have been too busy learning the simplest things to trouble about the most difficult.”

“To learn, then, has been *your* object all

this time. Let me question you in turn. Do you find it all-sufficient?"

"No; because I have begun too late. I am doing now what I ought to have done when I was a girl, and I have always the feeling of being behindhand."

"But the object, in itself, quite apart from your progress? Is it enough to study a variety of things, and feel that you make some progress towards a possible ideal of education? Does this suffice to your life?"

She answered confusedly:

"I can't know yet; I can't see before me clearly enough."

Mallard was on the point of pressing the question, but he refrained, and shaped his thought in a different way.

"Do you think of remaining in England?"

"Probably I shall."

"You will return to your home in Lancashire?"

"I haven't yet determined," she replied formally.

The dialogue seemed to be at an end.

Unobservant of each other, they reached the Via Crucis which leads up to S. Pietro in Montorio. Arrived at the terrace, they stood to look down on Rome.

"After all, you are tired," said Mallard, when he had glanced at her.

"Indeed I am not."

"But you are hungry. We have been forgetting that it is luncheon-time."

"I pay little attention to such hours. One can always get something to eat."

"It's all very well for people like myself to talk in that way," said Mallard, with a smile, "but ladies have orderly habits of life."

"For which you a little despise them?" she returned, with grave face fixed on the landscape.

"Certainly not. It's only that I regard their life as wholly different from my own. Since I was a boy, I have known nothing of domestic regularity."

"You sometimes visit your relatives?"

"Yes. But their life cannot be mine.

It is domestic in such a degree that it only serves to remind me how far apart I am."

"Do you hold that an artist cannot live like other people, in the habits of home?"

"I think such habits are a danger to him. He *may* find a home, if fate is exceptionally kind."

Pointing northwards to a ridged hill on the horizon, he asked in another voice if she knew its name.

"You mean Mount Soraete?"

"Yes. You don't know Latin, or it would make you quote Horace."

She shook her head, looked down, and spoke more humbly than he had ever yet heard her.

"But I know it in an English translation."

"Well, that's more than most ladies do."

He said it in a grudging way. The remark itself was scarcely civil, but he seemed all at once to have a pleasure in speaking roughly, in reminding her of her shortcomings. Miriam turned her eyes in another quarter, and presently pointed to

the far blue hills just seen between the Alban and the Sabine ranges.

"Through there is the country of the Volsci," she said, in a subdued voice. "Some Roman must have stood here and looked towards it, in days when Rome was struggling for supremacy with that tribe. Think of all that happened between that day and the time when Horace saw the snow on Soracte; and then, of all that has happened since."

He watched her face, and nodded several times. They pursued the subject, and reminded each other of what the scene suggested, point by point. Mallard felt surprise, though he showed none. Cecily, standing here, would have spoken with more enthusiasm, but it was doubtful whether she would have displayed Miriam's accuracy of knowledge.

"Well, let us go," he said at length. "You don't insist on walking home?"

"There is no need to, I think. I could quite well, if I wished."

"I am going to run through a few of the galleries for a morning or two. I wonder whether you would care to come with me to-morrow?"

"I will come with pleasure."

"That is how people speak when they don't like to refuse a troublesome invitation."

"Then what am I to say? I spoke the truth, in quite simple words."

"I suppose it was your tone; you seemed too polite."

"But what is your objection to politeness?"
Miriam asked naïvely.

"Oh, I have none, when it is sincere. But as soon as I had asked you, I felt afraid that I was troublesome."

"If I had felt that, I should have expressed it unmistakably," she replied, in a voice which reminded him of the road from Baia to Naples.

"Thank you; that is what I should wish."

Having found a carriage for her, and made an appointment for the morning, he watched her drive away.

A few hours later, he encountered Spence in the Piazza Colonna, and they went together into a *caffè*. Spence had the news that Mrs. Lessingham and her niece would arrive on the third day from now. Their stay would be of a fortnight at longest.

"I met Mrs. Baske at the Vatican this morning," said Mallard presently, as he knocked the ash off his cigar. "We had some talk."

"On Vatican subjects?"

"Yes. I find her views of art somewhat changed. But sculpture still alarms her."

"Still? Do you suppose she will ever overcome that feeling? Are you wholly free from it yourself? Imagine yourself invited to conduct a party of ladies through the marbles, and to direct their attention to the merits that strike you."

"No doubt I should invent an excuse. But it would be weakness."

"A weakness inseparable from our civilization. The nude in art is an anachronism."

“Pooh! That is encouraging the vulgar prejudice.”

“No; it is merely stating a vulgar fact. These collections of nude figures in marble have only an historical interest. They are kept out of the way, in places which no one is obliged to visit. Modern work of that kind is tolerated, nothing more. What on earth is the good of an artistic production of which people in general are afraid to speak freely? You take your stand before the Venus of the Capitol; you bid the attendant make it revolve slowly, and you begin a lecture to your wife, your sister, or your young cousin, on the glories of the masterpiece. You point out in detail how admirably Praxiteles has exhibited every beauty of the female frame. Other ladies are standing by; you smile blandly, and include them in your audience.”

Mallard interrupted with a laugh.

“Well, why not?” continued the other.
“This isn’t the *gabinetto* at Naples, surely? But you are well aware that, practically, it

comes to the same thing, How often is one half pained, half amused, at the behaviour of women in the Tribune at Florence! They are in a false position; it is absurd to ridicule them for what your own sensations justify. For my own part, I always leave my wife and Mrs. Baske to go about these galleries without my company. If I can't be honestly at my ease, I won't make pretence of being so."

"All this is true enough, but the prejudice is absurd. We ought to despise it and struggle against it."

"Despise it, many of us do, theoretically. But to make practical demonstrations against it, is to oppose, as I said, all the civilization of our world. Perhaps there will come a time once more when sculpture will be justified; at present the art doesn't and can't exist. Its relics belong to museums—in the English sense of the word."

"You only mean by this," said Mallard, "that art isn't for the multitude. We know that well enough."

“But there’s a special difficulty about this point. We come across it in literature as well. How is it that certain pages in literature, which all intellectual people agree in pronouncing just as pure as they are great, could never be read aloud, say, in a family circle, without occasioning pain and dismay? No need to give illustrations; they occur to you in abundance. We skip them, or we read mutteringly, or we say frankly that this is not adapted for reading aloud. Yet no man would frown if he found his daughter bent over the book. There’s something radically wrong here.”

“This is the old question of our English Puritanism. In France, here in Italy, there is far less of such feeling.”

“Far less; but why must there be any at all? And Puritanism isn’t a sufficient explanation. The English Puritans of the really Puritan time had freedom of conversation which would horrify us of to-day. We become more and more prudish as what we call civilization advances. It is a hateful

fact that, from the domestic point of view, there exists no difference between some of the noblest things in art and poetry, and the obscenities which are prosecuted; the one is as impossible of frank discussion as the other."

"The domestic point of view is contemptible. It means the bourgeois point of view, the Philistine point of view."

"Then I myself, if I had children, should be both bourgeois and Philistine. And so, I have a strong suspicion, would you too."

"Very well," replied Mallard, with some annoyance, "then it is one more reason why an artist should have nothing to do with domesticities. But look here, you are wrong as regards me. If ever I marry, *amico mio*, my wife shall learn to make more than a theoretical distinction between what is art and what is grossness. If ever I have children, they shall from the first be taught a natural morality, and not the conventional. If I can afford good casts of

noble statues, they shall stand freely about my house. When I read aloud, by the fire-side, there shall be no skipping or muttering or frank omissions; no, by Apollo! If a daughter of mine cannot describe to me the points of difference between the Venus of the Capitol and that of the Medici, she shall be bidden to use her eyes and her brains better. I'll have no contemptible prudery in *my* house!"

"Bravissimo!" cried Spence, laughing. "I see that my cousin Miriam is not the only person who has progressed during these years. Do you remember a certain conversation of ours at Posilippo about the education of a certain young lady?"

"Yes, I do. But that was a different matter. The question was not of Greek statues and classical books, but of modern pruriencies and shallowness and irresponsibility."

"You exaggerated then, and you do so now," said Spence; "at present with less excuse."

Mallard kept silence for a space ; then said :

“Let us speak of what we have been avoiding. How has that marriage turned out ?”

“I have told you all I know. There’s no reason to suppose that things are anything but well.”

“I don’t like her coming abroad alone ; I have no faith in that plea of work. I suspect things are *not* well.”

“A cynic—which I am not — would suggest that a wish had something to do with the thought.”

“He would be cynically wrong,” replied Mallard, with calmness.

“Why shouldn’t she come abroad alone ? There’s nothing alarming in the fact that they no longer need to see each other every hour. And one takes for granted that *they*, at all events, are not bourgeois ; their life won’t be arranged exactly like that of Mr. and Mrs. Jones the greengrocers.”

“No,” said the other, musingly.

“In what direction do you imagine that Cecily will progress? Possibly she has become acquainted with disillusion.”

“Possibly?”

“Well, take it for certain. Isn’t that an inevitable step in her education? Things may still be well enough, philosophically speaking. She has her life to live—we know it will be to the end a modern life. *Servetur ad imum*, and so on; that’s what one would wish, I suppose? We have no longer to take thought for her.”

“But we are allowed to wish the best.”

“What is the best?” said Spence, sustaining his tone of impartial speculation. “Are you quite sure that Mr. and Mrs. Jones are not too much in your mind?”

“Whatever modern happiness may mean, I am inclined to think that modern *un*-happiness is not unlike that of old-fashioned people.”

“My dear fellow, you are a halter between two opinions. You can’t make up your mind in which direction to look. You are

a sort of Janus, with anxiety on both faces."

"There's a good deal of truth in that," admitted the artist, with a growl.

"Get on with your painting, and whatever else of practical you have in mind. Leave philosophy to men of large leisure and placid pulses, like myself. Accept the inevitable."

"I do so."

"But not with modern detachment," said Spence, smiling.

"Be hanged with your modernity! I believe myself distinctly the more modern of the two."

"Not with regard to women. When you marry, you will be a rigid autocrat, and make no pretence about it. You don't think of women as independent beings, who must save or lose themselves on their own responsibility. You are not willing to trust them alone."

"Well, perhaps you are right."

"Of course I am. Come and dine at

the hotel. I think Seaborne will be there."

"No, thank you."

Mallard had waited but a few minutes in the court of the Palazzo Borghese next morning, when Miriam joined him. There was some constraint on both sides. Miriam looked as if she did not wish yesterday's conversation to be revived in their manner of meeting. Her "Good morning, Mr. Mallard," had as little reference as possible to the fact of this being an appointment. The artist was in quite another mood than that of yesterday; his smile was formal, and he seemed indisposed for conversation.

"I have the *permesso*," he said, leading at once to the door of the gallery.

They sauntered about the first room, exchanging a few idle remarks. In the second, a woman past the prime of life was copying a large picture. They looked at her work from a distance, and Miriam asked if it was well done.

“What do you think yourself?” asked Mallard.

“It seems to me skilful and accurate, but I know that perhaps it is neither one nor the other.”

He pointed out several faults, which she at once recognized.

“I wonder I could not see them at first. That confirms me in distrust of myself. I am as likely as not to admire a thing that is utterly worthless.”

“As likely as not—no; at least, I think not. But of course your eye is untrained, and you have no real knowledge to go upon. You can judge an original picture sentimentally, and your sentiment will not be wholly misleading. You can’t judge a copy technically, but I think you have more than average observation. How would you like to spend your life like this copyist?”

“I would give my left hand to have her skill in my right.”

“You would?”

"I should be able to *do* something—something definite and tolerably good."

"Why, so you can already ; one thing in particular."

"What is that ?"

"Learn your own deficiencies ; a thing that most people neither will nor can. Look at this Francia, and tell me your thoughts about it."

She examined the picture for a minute or two. Then, without moving her eyes, she murmured :

"I can say nothing that is worth saying."

"Never mind. Say what you think, or what you feel."

"Why should you wish me to talk commonplace ?"

"That is precisely what I don't wish you to talk. You know what is commonplace, and therefore you can avoid it. Never mind his school or his date. What did the man want to express here, and how far do you think he has succeeded ? That's the

main thing ; I wish a few critics would understand it."

Miriam obeyed him, and said what she had to say diffidently, but in clear terms. Mallard was silent when she ceased, and she looked up at him. He rewarded her with a smile, and one or two nods—as his manner was.

"I have not made myself ridiculous?"

"I think not."

They had walked on a little, when Mallard said to her unexpectedly :

"Please to bear in mind that I make no claim to infallibility. I am a painter of landscape ; out of my own sphere, I become an amateur. You are not bound to accept my judgment."

"Of course not," she replied simply.

"It occurred to me that I had been rather dictatorial."

"So you have, Mr. Mallard," she returned, looking at a picture.

"I am sorry. It's the failing of men who have often to be combative, and who live

much in solitude. I will try to use a less offensive tone."

"I didn't mean that your tone was in the least offensive."

"A more polite tone, then—as you taught me yesterday."

"I had rather you spoke just as is natural to you."

Mallard laughed.

"Politeness is not natural to me, I admit. I am horribly uncomfortable whenever I have to pick my words out of regard to polite people. That is why I shun what is called society. What little I have seen of it has been more than enough for me."

"I have seen still less of it; but I understand your dislike."

"Before you left home, didn't you associate a great deal with people?"

"People of a certain kind," she replied coldly. "It was not society as you mean it."

"You will be glad to mix more freely with the world, when you are back in England?"

"I can't tell. By whom is that Madonna?"

Thus they went slowly on, until they came to the little hall where the fountain plays, and whence is the outlook over the Tiber. It was delightful to sit here in the shadows, made cooler and fresher by that plashing water, and to see the glorious sunlight gleam upon the river's tawny flow.

"Each time that I have been in Rome," said Mallard, "I have felt, after the first few days, a peculiar mental calm. The other cities of Italy haven't the same effect on me. Perhaps every one experiences it, more or less. There comes back to me at moments the kind of happiness which I knew as a boy—a freedom from the sense of duties and responsibilities, of work to be done, and of disagreeable things to be faced; the kind of contentment I used to have when I was reading lives of artists, or looking at prints of famous pictures, or myself trying to draw. It is possible that this mood is not such a strange one with many people as

with me ; when it comes, I feel grateful to the powers that rule life. Since boyhood, I have never known it in the north. Out of Rome, perhaps only in fine weather on the Mediterranean. But in Rome is its perfection."

"I thought you preferred the north," said Miriam.

"Because I so often choose to work there ? I can do better work when I take subjects in wild scenery and stern climates, but when my thoughts go out for pleasure, they choose Italy. I don't enjoy myself in the Hebrides or in Norway, but what powers I have are all brought out there. Here I am not disposed to work. I want to live, and I feel that life can be a satisfaction in itself without labour. I am naturally the idlest of men. Work is always pain to me. I like to dream pictures ; but it's terrible to drag myself before the blank canvas."

Miriam gazed at the Tiber.

"Do these palaces," he asked, "ever make

you wish you owned them ? Did you ever imagine yourself walking among the marbles and the pictures with the sense of this being your home ? ”

“ I have wondered what that must be. But I never wished it had fallen to my lot. ”

“ No ? You are not ambitious ? ”

“ Not in that way. To own a palace such as this would make one insignificant. ”

“ That is admirably true ! I should give it away, to recover self-respect. Shakespeare or Michael Angelo might live here and make it subordinate to him ; I should be nothing but the owner of the palace. You like to feel your individuality ? ”

“ Who does not ? ”

“ In you, I think it is strong. ”

Miriam smiled a little, as if she liked the compliment. Before either spoke again, other visitors came to look at the view, and disturbed them.

“ I shan’t ask you to come anywhere to-morrow, ” said Mallard, when they had again

talked for awhile of pictures. "And the next day Mrs. Elgar will be here."

She looked at him.

"That wouldn't prevent me from going to a gallery—if you thought of it."

"You will have much to talk of. And your stay in Rome won't be long after that."

Miriam made no reply.

"I wish your brother had been coming," he went on. "I should have liked to hear from him about the book he is writing."

"Shall you not be in London before long?" she asked, without show of much interest.

"I think so, but I have absolutely no plans. Probably it is raining hard in England, or even snowing. I must enjoy the sunshine a little longer. I hope your health won't suffer from the change of climate."

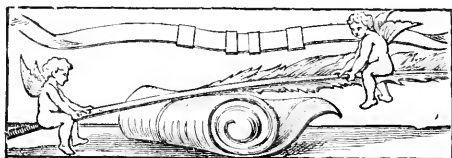
"I hope not," she answered mechanically.

"Perhaps you will find you can't live there?"

"What does it matter? I have no ties."

“No, you are independent; that is a great blessing.”

Chatting as if of indifferent things, they left the gallery.





CHAPTER VIII.

STUMBLINGS.

ROLLED tightly together, and tied up with string, at the bottom of one of Miriam's trunks lay the plans of that new chapel for which Bartles still waited. Miriam did not like to come upon them, in packing or unpacking ; she had covered them with things which probably would not be moved until she was again in England.

But the thought of them could not be so satisfactorily hidden. It lay in a corner of her mind, and many were the new acquisitions heaped upon it ; but in spite of herself she frequently burrowed through all those accumulations of travel, and sought the thing beneath. Sometimes the impulse was so harassing, the process so distressful, that she might have been compared to a

murderer who haunts the burial-place of his victim, and cannot restrain himself from disturbing the earth.

It was by no methodic inquiry, no deliberate reasoning, that Miriam had set aside her old convictions and ordered her intellectual life on the new scheme. Of those who are destined to pass beyond the bounds of dogma, very few indeed do so by the way of studious investigation. How many of those who abide by inherited faith owe their steadfastness to a convinced understanding? Convictions, in the proper sense of the word, Miriam had never possessed; she accepted what she was taught, without reflecting upon it, and pride subsequently made her stubborn in consistency. The same pride, aided by the ennui of mental faculties just becoming self-conscious, and the desires of a heart for the first time humanly touched, constrained her to turn abruptly from the ideal she had pursued, and with unforeseen energy begin to qualify herself for the assertion of new claims. No

barriers of logic stood in her way ; it was a simple matter of facing round about. True, she still had to endure the sense of having chosen the wide way instead of that strait one which is authoritatively prescribed. It was a long time before she made any endeavour to justify herself ; but the wide way ran through a country that delighted her, and her progress was so noticeable that self-commendation and the respect of others made her careless of the occasional stings of conscience.

She was able now to review the process of change, and to compare the two ideals. Without the support of a single argument of logical value, she stamped all the beliefs of her childhood as superstition, and marvelled that they had so long held their power over her. Her childhood, indeed, seemed to her to have lasted until she came to Naples ; with hot shame she reflected on her speech and behaviour at that time. What did the Spences think of her ? How did they speak of her to their friends ?

What impression did she make upon Mallard? These memories were torture; they explained the mixture of humility and assumption which on certain days made her company disagreeable to Eleanor, and the dark moods which now and then held her in sullen solitude.

But the word "superstition" was no guarantee against the haunting of superstition itself. Miriam was far from being one of the emancipated, however arrogantly she would have met a doubt of her freedom. Just as little as ever had she genuine convictions, capable of supporting her in hours of weakness and unsatisfied longing. Several times of late she had all but brought herself to speak plainly with Eleanor, and ask on what foundation was built that calm life which seemed independent of supernatural belief; but shame always restrained her. It would be the same as confessing that she had not really the liberty to which she pretended. There was, however, an indirect way of approaching the subject, by

which her dignity would possibly be rather enhanced than suffer ; and this she at length took. After her return from the Palazzo Borghese, she was beset with a confusion of anxious thoughts. The need of confidential or semi-confidential speech with one of her own sex became irresistible. In the evening she found an opportunity of speaking privately with Eleanor.

“I want to ask your opinion about something. It’s a question I am obliged to decide now I am going back to England.”

Eleanor smiled inquiringly. She was not a little curious to have a glimpse into her cousin’s mind just now.

“You remember,” pursued Miriam, leaning forward on a table by which she sat, and playing with a twisted piece of paper, “that I once had the silly desire to build a chapel at Bartles.”

She reddened in hearing the words upon her own lips—so strange a sound they had after all this time.

“I remember you talked of doing so,”

replied Eleanor, with her usual quiet good-nature.

“Unfortunately, I did more than talk about it. I made a distinct promise to certain people gravely interested. The promise was registered in a Bartles newspaper. And you know that I went so far as to have plans made.”

“Do you feel bound by this promise, my dear?”

Miriam propped her cheek on one hand, and with the other kept rolling the piece of paper on the table.

“Yes,” she answered, “I can’t help thinking that I ought to keep my word. How does it strike you, Eleanor?”

“I am not quite clear how you regard the matter. Are you speaking of the promise only as a promise?”

It was no use. Miriam could not tell the truth; she could not confess her position. At once a smile trembled scornfully upon her lips.

“What else could I mean?”

"Then it seems to me that the obligation has passed away with the circumstances that occasioned it."

Miriam kept her eyes on the table, and for a few moments seemed to reflect.

"A promise is a promise, Eleanor."

"So it is. And a fact is a fact. I take it for granted that you are no longer the person who made the promise. I have a faint recollection that when I was about eight years old, I pledged myself, on reaching maturity, to give my nurse the exact half of my worldly possessions. I don't feel the least ashamed of having made such a promise, and just as little of not having kept it."

Miriam smiled, but still had an unconvinced face.

"I was not eight years old," she said, "but about four and twenty."

"Then let us put it in this way. Do you still feel a desire to benefit that religious community in Bartles? Would it distress you to think that they shook their heads in mentioning your name?"

"I do feel rather in that way," Miriam admitted slowly.

"But is this enough to justify you in giving them half or more of all you possess? You spoke of pulling down Redbeck House, and building on the site, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"In any case, should you ever live there again?"

"Never."

"You prefer to be with us in London?"

"I think you have been troubled with me quite long enough. Perhaps I might take rooms."

"If you are as willing to share our house as we are to have you with us, there can be no need for you to live alone."

"I can't make up my mind about that, Eleanor. Let us talk only about the chapel just now. Are you sure that other people would see it as you do?"

"Other people of my way of thinking would no doubt think the same—which is a pretty piece of tautology. Edward would

be amazed to hear that you have such scruples. It isn't as if you had promised to support a family in dire need, or anything of that kind. The chapel is a superfluity."

"Not to them."

"They have one already."

"But very small and inconvenient."

"Suppose you ask Mr. Mallard for his thoughts on the subject?" said Eleanor, as if at the bidding of a caprice.

"Does Mr. Mallard know that I once had this purpose?"

"I think so," replied the other, with a little hesitation. "You know that there was no kind of reserve about it when you first came to Naples."

"No, of course not. Do you feel as sure of his opinion as of Edward's?"

"I can't say that I do. There's no foreseeing his judgment about anything. As you are such good friends, why not consult him?"

"Our friendship doesn't go so far as that."

“And after all, I don’t see what use other people’s opinions can be to you,” said Eleanor, waiving the point. “It’s a matter of sentiment. Strict obligation you see, of course, that there is none whatever. If it would please you to use a large sum of money in this way, you have a perfect right to do so. But, by-the-bye, oughtn’t you to make the Bartles people clearly understand who it is that builds their chapel?”

“Surely there is no need of that?”

“I think so. The scruple, in my case, would be far more on this side than on the other.”

Miriam did not care to pursue the conversation. The one result of it was that she had an added uncertainty. She had thought that her proposal to fulfil the promise would at least earn the respect which is due to stern conscientiousness; but Eleanor clearly regarded it as matter for the smile one bestows on good-natured folly. Her questions even showed that she was at first in doubt as to the motives

which had revived this project—a doubt galling to Miriam, because of its justification. She said, in going away :

“Please to consider that this was in confidence, Eleanor.”

Confidence of a barren kind. It was the same now as it had ever been ; she had no one with whom she could communicate her secrets, no friend in the nearer sense. On this loneliness she threw the blame of those faults which she painfully recognized in herself — her frequent insincerity, her speeches and silences calculated for effect, her pride based on disingenuousness. If she could but have disclosed her heart in the humility of love and trust, how would its aching have been eased !

For a long time she had been absorbed, or nearly so, in studying and observing ; but Mallard’s inquiry whether she found this sufficient touched the source whence trouble was again arising for her. Three years ago it did not cost her much to subdue a desire which had hopelessness for

its birthright ; the revival of this desire now united itself with disquietudes of the maturing intellect, and she looked forward in dread to a continuation of her loneliness. Some change in her life there must be. Sudden hope had in a day or two brought to full growth the causes of unrest which would otherwise have developed slowly.

It seemed to be her fate to live in pretences. As the mistress of Redbeck House, and the light of dissenting piety in Bartles, she knew herself for less than she wished to appear to others ; not a hypocrite, indeed, but a pretender to extraordinary zeal, and at the same time a flagrant instance of spiritual pride. Now she was guilty of like simulation directed to a contrary end. In truth neither bond nor free, she could not suffer herself to seem less liberal-minded than those with whom she associated. And yet her soul was weary of untruth. The one need of her life was to taste the happiness of submission to a stronger than herself. Religious devotion is the resource

of women in general who suffer thus and are denied the natural solace ; but for Miriam it was impossible. Her temperament was not devout, and, however persistent the visitings of uneasy conscience, she had no longer the power of making her old beliefs a reality. The abstract would not avail her ; philosophic comforts had as little to say to her as the Churches' creeds. Only by a strong human hand could she be raised from her unworthy position and led into the way of sincerity.

She had counted on having another morning with Mallard before Cecily's arrival. Disappointed in this hope, she invented a variety of tormenting reasons for Mallard's behaviour. As there was a chance of his calling at the hotel, she stayed in all day. But he did not come. The next afternoon Mrs. Lessingham and her companion reached Rome.

It was known that Cecily's health had suffered from her watchings by the sick

child, and from her grief at its death ; so no one was surprised at finding her rather thin-faced. She had a warm greeting for her friends, and seemed happy to be with them again ; but the brightness of the first hour was not sustained. Conversation cost her a perceptible effort ; she seldom talked freely of anything, and generally with an unnatural weighing of her words, an artificiality of thought and phrase, which was a great contrast to the spontaneousness of former times. When Eleanor wanted her to speak about herself, she preferred to tell of what she had lately read or heard or seen. That the simple grace of the girl should be modified in the wife and mother was of course to be expected, but Cecily looked older than she ought to have done, and occasionally bore herself with a little too much consciousness, as if she felt the observation even of intimate friends something of a restraint.

Miriam, when she had made inquiries about her brother's health, took little part

in the general conversation, and it was not till late in the evening that she spoke with Cecily in private.

“ May I come and sit with you for a few minutes ? ” Cecily asked, when Miriam was going to her bedroom.

They were far less at ease with each other than when their differences of opinion were a recognized obstacle to intimacy. Cecily was uncertain how far her sister-in-law had progressed from the old standpoint, and she saw in her even an increase of the wonted reticence. On her own side there was no longer a warm impulse of sisterly affection. But her first words, when they were alone together, sounded like an appeal for tender confidence.

“ I do so wish you had seen my poor little boy ! ”

“ I wish I had been nearer, ” Miriam answered kindly. “ It is very sad that you have suffered such a loss. ”

Cecily spoke of the child, and with simple feeling, which made her more like herself than hitherto.

“When a little thing dies at that age,” she said presently, “it is only the mother’s grief. The father cannot have much interest in so young a child.”

“But Reuben wrote very affectionately of Clarence in one letter I had from him.”

“Yes, but it is natural that he shouldn’t feel the loss as I do. A man has his business in life ; a woman, if she needn’t work for bread, has nothing to do but be glad or sorry for what happens in her home.”

“I shouldn’t have thought you took that view of a woman’s life,” said Miriam, after a silence, regarding the other with uncertain eyes.

“ ‘Views’ have become rather a weariness to me,” answered Cecily, smiling sadly. “Sorrow is sorrow to me as much as to the woman who never questioned one of society’s beliefs ; it makes me despondent. No doubt I ought to find all sorts of superior consolations. But I don’t and can’t. A woman’s natural lot is to care for her husband and bring up children. Do you

believe, Miriam, that anything will ever take the place of these occupations?"

"I suppose not. But time will help you, and your interests will come back again."

"True. On the other hand, it is equally true that I am now seeing how little those interests really amount to. They are pastime, if you like, but nothing more. Some women do serious work, however; I wish I could be one of them. To them, perhaps, 'views' are something real and helpful. But never mind myself; you were glad to hear that Reuben is working on?"

"Very glad."

Cecily waited a little; then, watching the other's face, asked:

"You know what he is writing?"

"In a general way," Miriam answered, averting her eyes. "Do you think he has made a wise choice?"

"I dare say it is the subject on which he will write best," Cecily answered, smiling.

"I doubt whether he understands it sufficiently," said Miriam, with balanced

tone. "He has really nothing but prejudice to go upon. There will be a great deal of misrepresentation in his book—if he ever finishes it."

"Yes, I am afraid that is true. But it may be useful, after all. Here and there he will hit the mark."

Cecily was tentative. She saw Miriam's brows work uneasily.

"Perhaps so," was the reply. "But I know quite well that such a book would have been no use to me when I stood in need of the kind of help you mean."

"To be sure; it is for people who have already helped themselves," said Cecily, in a jesting tone.

Miriam turned to another subject, and very soon said good night. Reflecting on the conversation, she was annoyed with herself for having been led by her familiar weakness to admit that she had changed her way of thinking. Certainly she had no intention of disguising the fact, but this explicit confession had seemed to make her

Cecily's inferior ; she was like a school-girl claiming recognition of progress.

The next morning Mallard called. He came into a room where Mrs. Lessingham, Eleanor, and Miriam were waiting for Cecily to join them, that all might go out together. Miriam had never seen him behave with such easiness of manner. He was in good spirits, and talked with a facility most unusual in him. Mrs. Lessingham said she would go and see why Cecily delayed ; Eleanor also made an excuse for leaving the room. But Miriam remained, standing by the window and looking into the street ; Mallard stood near her, but did not speak. The silence lasted for a minute or two ; then Cecily entered, and at once the artist greeted her with warm friendliness. Miriam had turned, but did not regard the pair directly ; her eye caught their reflection in a mirror, and she watched them closely without seeming to do so. Cecily had made her appearance with a face of pleased anticipation ; she looked for the first moment with

much earnestness at her old friend, and when she spoke to him it was with the unmistakable accent of emotion. Mallard was gentle, reverent; he held her hand a little longer than was necessary, but his eyes quickly fell from her countenance.

“Your husband is well?” he asked in a full, steady voice.

They seated themselves, and Miriam again turned to the window. Cecily’s voice made a jarring upon her ear; it was so much sweeter and more youthful, so much more like the voice of Cecily Doran, than when it addressed other people. Mallard, too, continued in a soft, pleasant tone, quite different from his usual speech; Miriam thrilled with irritation as she heard him.

“They have told me of the picture you painted at Pæstum. When may Mrs. Lesingham and I come and see it?”

“I haven’t a place in which I could receive you. I’ll bring the thing here, whenever you like.”

Miriam moved. She wished to leave the

room, but could not decide herself to do so. In the same moment Mallard glanced round at her. She interpreted his look as one of impatience, and at once said to Cecily :

“ I think I'll change my mind, and write some letters this morning. Perhaps you could persuade Mr. Mallard to take my place for the drive.”

“ Oh ! ” exclaimed Cecily, with a laugh, “ I'm quite sure Mr. Mallard has no desire to go to the English cemetery.” She added in explanation, to Mallard himself, “ My aunt has promised to visit a certain grave, and copy the inscription for a friend at Florence.”

Whilst she was speaking, Mrs. Lessingham and Eleanor returned. Mallard, rising, looked at Miriam with a singular smile ; then talked a little longer, and, with a promise to come again soon, took his leave.

“ Don't disappoint us,” said Cecily to Miriam, in the most natural tone.

“ It was only that I felt we were making Mr. Mallard's visit very short,” answered Miriam, constrained by shame.

“He detests ceremony. You couldn’t please him better than by saying, ‘Please don’t hinder me now, but come when I’m at leisure.’”

It was peculiarly distasteful to Miriam to have information concerning the artist’s character offered her by Cecily, in spite of the playful tone. During the drive, she persuaded herself that Cecily’s improved spirits were entirely due to the conversation with Mallard, and this stirred fresh resentment in her. She had foreseen the effect upon her own feelings of the meeting which had just come about; it was extreme folly, but she could not control it.

The next day Mallard brought his picture again to the hotel, and spent nearly an hour with Mrs. Lessingham and Cecily in their sitting-room. Miriam heard of this on her return from a solitary walk, and heard, moreover, that Mallard had been showing his friends a number of little drawings which he had never offered to let her or the Spences see. In the afternoon she again

went out by herself, and, whilst looking into a shop-window in the Piazza di Spagna, became aware of Mallard's face reflected in the glass. She drew aside before looking round at him.

"That is a clever piece of work," he said, indicating a water-colour in the window, and speaking as if they had already been in conversation. He had not even made the hat-salute.

"I thought so," Miriam replied, very coldly, looking at something else.

"Are you going home, Mrs. Baske?"

"Yes. I only came out to buy something."

"I am just going to see the studio of an Italian to whom Mr. Seaborne introduced me yesterday. It's in the Quattro-Fontane. Would it interest you?"

"Thank you, Mr. Mallard; I had rather not go this afternoon."

He accepted the refusal with a courteous smile, raised his hat in approved manner, and turned to cross the Piazza as she went her way.

She had refused out of mere perversity, when her heart gave a throb of pleasure at the thought of accompanying him to the studio. The short distance she had to walk to the hotel was a waste of wretchedness. She understood perfectly why he had been so careful in fulfilling the forms of politeness when he left her; that was contemptuous, whereas his informal address to begin with had been full of respect. It seemed to her that she had known Mallard intimately for a very long time; as if her acquaintance with him had grown during the years when they did not see each other. Every inflection of his voice had now a significance for her, and such as it certainly could not have for people in general; his glances were fuller of meaning for her than for others. And she had the conviction that her own face and voice were just as intelligible to him. He knew—she felt it with pangs of certainty—why she had behaved to him in this changed way; therefore it was that he treated her with depreciating courtesy.

Perhaps she had put an end to their intimacy. Perhaps her imbecile jealousy had moved such scorn in him that he would no more regard her with interest.

This evening they had a visit from Seaborne, who met Mrs. Lessingham and Cecily for the first time. These ladies were predisposed to like him, and before he left they did so genuinely. In his pleasantly quiet way, he showed much respectful admiration of Mrs. Elgar.

"Now, isn't there a resemblance to Mr. Mallard?" asked Eleanor, when the visitor was gone.

"Just—just a little," admitted Cecily, with fastidiousness and an amused smile. "But Mr. Seaborne doesn't impress me as so original, so strong."

"Oh, that he certainly isn't," said Spence. "But acuter, and perhaps a finer feeling in several directions."

Miriam listened, and again was tortured.

She had suffered all the evening from observing Cecily, whose powers of conversa-

tion and charms of manner made her bitterly envious. How far she herself was from this ideal of the instructed and socially trained woman! The presence of a stranger had banished Cecily's despondent mood, and put all her capacities in display. With a miserable sense of humiliation, Miriam compared her own insignificant utterances and that bright, often brilliant, talk which held the attention of every one. Beside Cecily, she was still indeed nothing but a school-girl, who with much labour was getting a smattering of common knowledge; for, though Cecily had no profound acquirements, the use she made of what she did know was always suggestive, intellectual, individual.

What wonder that Mallard brought out his drawings to show them to Cecily? There would be nothing commonplace in *her* remarks and admiration.

She felt herself a paltry pretender to those possibilities of modern womanhood which were open to Cecily from her birth. In the course of natural development, Cecily,

whilst still a girl, threw for ever behind her all superstitions and harassing doubts; she was in the true sense “emancipated”—a word Edward Spence was accustomed to use jestingly. And this was Mallard’s conception of the admirable in woman.

Envy is of close kin to hatred, but Miriam could not yet hate her brother’s wife. That Cecily *was* a wife, therein lay the one solace amid so much wretchedness, and a safeguard against the worst extremes of jealousy. This much fruit she still had of that poor satisfaction attained three years ago.





CHAPTER IX.

SILENCES.

CECILY was seeing Rome for the first time, but she could not enjoy it in the way natural to her. It was only at rare moments that she *felt* Rome. One of the most precious of her life's anticipations was fading into memory, displaced by a dull experience, numbered among disillusionments. Not that what she beheld disappointed her, but that she was not herself in beholding. Had she stayed here on her first visit to Italy, on what a strong current of enthusiasm would the hours and the days have borne her! What a light would have glowed upon the Seven Hills, and how would every vulgarity of the modern streets have been transformed by her imagination! But now she was in no haste to visit the most sacred spots; she

was content to take each in its turn, and her powers of attention soon flagged. It had been the same in Florence. She felt herself reduced to a lower level of existence than was native to her. Had she lived her life—all that was worth calling life?

Her chief solace was in the society of Mrs. Spence. Formerly she had not been prepared for appreciating Eleanor, but now she felt the beauties of that calm, self-reliant character, rich in a mode of happiness which it seemed impossible for herself ever to attain. Fortune had been Eleanor's friend. Disillusion had come to her only in the form of beneficent wisdom; no dolorous dead leaves rustled about her feet and clogged her walk. Happy even in the fact that she had never been a mother. She was a free woman; free in the love of her husband, free in the pursuit of knowledge and the cultivation of all her tastes. She had outlived passion without mourning it; what greater happiness than that can a woman expect? Cecily had once believed

that life was to be all passion, or a failure. She understood now that there was a middle path. But against her it was closed.

In a few days she could talk with Eleanor even of bygone things in a perfectly simple tone, without danger of betraying the thoughts she must keep secret. One such conversation reminded her of something she had learnt shortly before she left London.

“Do you remember,” she asked, “a family named Denyer, who were at Madame Glück’s?”

Eleanor recollected the name, and the characteristics attached to it.

“An acquaintance of mine who has rooms at Hampstead happened to speak of the people she is with, and it surprised me to discover that they were those very Denyers. One of the daughters is paralyzed, poor girl; I was shocked to remember her, and think of her visited by such a fate. I believe she was to have married that artist, Mr. Marsh, who gave Mr. Bradshaw so much amusement. And the eldest——”

She broke off to inquire why Eleanor had looked at her so expressively.

“I’ll tell you when you have finished your story. What of the eldest?”

“She has recently married Mr. Musselwhite, who was also one of our old acquaintances. Mrs. Travis—the lady who tells me all this—says that Mrs. Denyer is overjoyed at this marriage, for Mr. Musselwhite is the brother of a baronet!”

“Very satisfactory indeed. Well, now for Mr. Marsh. Edward heard from Mr. Bradshaw when we were in Sicily, and this young gentleman had a great part in the letter. It seems he has long abandoned his artistic career, and gone into commerce.”

“That most superior young man? But I remember something about that.”

“His business takes him often to Manchester, and he has been cultivating the acquaintance of the Bradshaws. And now there is an engagement between him and their eldest daughter.”

“Charlotte? What a queer thing to happen! Isn’t she about my age?”

“Yes; and, if she fulfils her promise, one of the plainest girls in existence. Her father jokes about the affair, but evidently doesn’t disapprove.”

It was Thursday, and the Spences had decided to start for London on Friday night. Miriam had been keeping much alone these last few days, and this morning was gone out by herself in the usual way. Spence was engaged with Seaborne. Mrs. Lessingham, Eleanor, and Cecily went to the Vatican.

Where also was Mallard. He had visited the chapel, and the Stanze, and the Loggia, and the picture-gallery, not looking at things, but seeming to look for some one; then he came out, and walked round St. Peter’s to the Museum. In the Sala Rotonda he encountered his friends.

They talked about the busts. Cecily was studying them with the catalogue, and wished Mallard to share her pleasure.

"The empresses interest me most," she said. "Come and do homage to them."

They look with immortal eyes, those three women who once saw the world at their feet: Plotina, the wife of Trajan; Faustina, the wife of Antoninus Pius; Julia, the wife of Septimius Severus. Noble heads, each so unlike the other. Plotina, with her strong, not beautiful, features, the high cheek-bones, the male chin; on her forehead a subdued anxiety. Faustina, the type of aristocratic self-consciousness, gloriously arrogant, splendidly beautiful, with her superb coronet of woven hair. Julia Domna, a fine, patrician face, with a touch of idleness and good-natured scorn about her lips, taking her dignity as a matter of course.

"These women awe me," Cecily murmured, as Mallard stood beside her. "They are not of our world. They make me feel as if I belonged to an inferior race."

"Glorious barbarians," returned Mallard.

"We of to-day have no right to say so."

Then the Antinous, the finest of all his

heads. It must be caught in profile, and you stand marvelling at the perfection of soulless beauty. And the Jupiter of Otricoli, most majestic of marble faces ; in that one deep line across the brow lies not only profound thought, but something of the care of rule, or something of pity for mankind ; as though he had just uttered his words in Homer : “ For verily there is no creature more afflicted than man, of all that breathe and move upon the earth.” But that other, the Serapis, is above care of every kind ; on his countenance is a divine placidity, a supernal blandness ; he gazes for ever in sublime and passionless reverie.

Thence they passed to the Hall of the Muses, and spoke of Thalia, whose sweet and noble face, with its deep, far-looking eyes, bears such a weary sadness. Comedy ? Yes ; comedy itself, when comedy is rightly understood.

And whilst they stood here, there came by a young priest, holding open a missal or

breviary or some such book, and muttering from it, as if learning by heart. Cecily followed him with her gaze.

“What a place for study of that kind!” she exclaimed, looking at Mallard.

He also had felt the incongruity, and laughed.

Two or three chambers of the Vatican sufficed for one day. Cecily would not trust herself to remain after her interest had begun to weary; it was much that she had won two hours of intellectual calm. Her companions had no wish to stay longer. Just as they came again into the Sala Rotonda, they found themselves face to face with Miriam.

“Did you know we were coming here?” asked Eleanor.

“I thought it likely.”

She shook hands with Mallard, but did not speak to him. Eleanor offered to stay with her, as this would be their last visit, but Miriam said in a friendly manner that she preferred to be alone. So they left her.

At the exit, Mallard saw his companions into a carriage, and himself walked on ; but as soon as the carriage was out of sight, he turned back. He had taken care to recover his *permesso* from the attendant, in the common way, when he came out, so that he could enter again immediately. He walked rapidly to the place where they had left Miriam, but she was gone. He went forward, and discovered her sitting before the Belvedere Apollo. As his entrance drew her attention, he saw that she had an impulse to rise ; but she overcame it, and again turned her eyes upon him, with a look in which self-control was unconsciously like defiance.

He sat down by her, and said :

“ I came to the Vatican this morning for the chance of meeting you.”

“ I hope that was not your only reason for coming,” she returned, in a voice of ordinary civility.

“ It was, in fact. I should have asked you to let me have your company for an

hour to-day, as it is practically your last in Rome ; but I was not sure that you would grant it, so I took my chance instead."

She waited a moment before replying.

"I am afraid you refer to your invitation of a few days ago. I didn't feel in the mood for going to a studio, Mr. Mallard."

"Yes, I was thinking of that. You refused in a way not quite like yourself. I began to be afraid that you thought me too regardless of forms."

His return had gratified her ; it was unexpected, and she set her face in a hard expression that it might not betray her sudden gladness. But the look of thinly masked resentment which succeeded told of what had been in her mind since she encountered him in the company of Cecily. That jealous pain was uncontrollable ; the most trivial occasions had kept exciting it, and now it made her sick at heart. The effort to speak conventionally was all but beyond her strength.

They had in common that personal diffi-

dence which is one of the phases of pride, and which proves so fruitful a source of misunderstandings. For all her self-esteem, Miriam could not obtain the conviction that, as a woman, she strongly interested Mallard; and the artist found it very hard to persuade himself that Miriam thought of him as anything but a man of some talent, whose attention was agreeable, and perhaps a little flattering. Still, he could not but notice that her changed behaviour connected itself with Cecily's arrival. It seemed to him extraordinary, almost incredible, that she should be jealous of his relations with her sister-in-law. Had she divined his passion for Cecily at Naples? (He cherished a delusion that the secret had never escaped him.) But to attribute jealousy to her was to assume that she set a high value on his friendship.

To his diffidence was due in a great measure the informality of his conversation with her. He feared lest she should think he aimed at something more than friendship,

and so was guilty of presumption. And in the estimate of his own feeling he was in fact presumptuous, though his intellect asserted his superiority. Miriam was exercising a strong attraction upon him, the attraction of profound sympathies which had not yet taken clear shape in his thought. Yet one of the results of this sympathy was an obstinate and masterful impulse now that she seemed to criticize him unfavourably, to set his dignity against hers. This made absolute distinction between the feelings with which she inspired him and those sufferings he had owed to Cecily. He had not the least fear of losing self-control ; his mind had never been clearer and more firm in its grasp of actualities. This very intimacy in which he found himself with her was an assurance against any sudden change in their relations ; to transgress the limits of friendship would, to his mind, have seemed an abuse of confidence. He was all but ready to tell himself that he loved her ; but that was far indeed from preparedness

to say the same to her. He had only to imagine the look of proud and pained astonishment with which such a hint might be received. Love in its beginning, when it has no assurance of return, must always be presumption. What he had a right to demand, and could demand, was her respect. If she chose to retract the privileges she had granted him, he could bear it; but she should be made ashamed of her inconsistency. His character should retain its predominance over hers; that was his uppermost desire just now.

Miriam had glanced at the Apollo as he spoke. Conscious of his eyes upon her, she looked away, saying in a forced tone :

“I had no such thought. You misunderstood me.”

“It was all my fault, then, and I am sorry for it. You said just now that you preferred to be alone. I shall come to the hotel to-morrow, just to say good-bye.”

He rose; and Miriam, as she did the same, asked formally :

“You are still uncertain how long you remain here?”

“Quite,” was his answer, cheerfully given.

“You are not going to work?”

“No; it is holiday with me for a while. I wish you were staying a little longer.”

“You will still have friends here.”

Mallard disliked the tone of this.

“Oh yes,” he replied. “I hope to see Mrs. Lessingham and Mrs. Elgar sometimes.”

He paused; then added:

“I dare say I shall return to England about the same time that they do. May I hope to see you in London?”

“I am quite uncertain where I shall be.”

“Then perhaps we shall not meet for a long time.—Will you let me give you one or two little drawings that may help to remind you of Italy?”

Miriam's cheeks grew warm, and she cast down her eyes.

“Your drawings are far too valuable to be given as one gives trifles, Mr. Mallard.”

“I don’t wish you to receive them as trifles. One of their values to me is that I can now and then please a friend with them. If you had rather I did not think of you as a friend, then you would be right to refuse them.”

“I will receive them gladly.”

“Thank you. They shall be sent to the hotel.”

They shook hands, and he left her.

On the morrow they met again for a few minutes, when he came to say good-bye. Miriam made no mention of the packet that had reached her. She was distant, and her smile at leave-taking very cold.

So the three travelled northwards.

Their departure brought back Cecily’s despondent mood. With difficulty she restrained her tears in parting from Eleanor; when she was alone, they had their way. She felt vaguely miserable—was troubled

with shapeless apprehensions, with a sense of desolateness.

The next day brought a letter from her husband. "Dear Ciss," he wrote, "I am sorry it's so long since I sent you a line, but really there's no news. I foresee that I shall not have much manuscript to show you ; I am reading hugely, but I don't feel ready to write. Hope you are much better ; give me notice of your return. My regards to Mallard ; I expect you will see very little of him." And so, with a "yours ever," the epistle ended.

This was all Reuben had to say to her, when she had been absent nearly a month. With a dull disappointment, she put the arid thing out of her sight. It had been her intention to write to-day, but now she could not. She had even less to say than he.

He expressed no wish for her return, and felt none. Perhaps it was merely indifferent to him how long she stayed away ; but she had no assurance that he did not prefer to be without her. And, for her own part,

had she any desire to be back again ? Here she was not contented, but at home she would be even less so.

The line in his letter which had reference to the much-talked-of book only confirmed her distrust. She had no faith in his work. The revival of his energy from time to time was no doubt genuine enough, but she knew that its subsequent decline was marked with all manner of pretences. Possibly he was still "reading hugely," but the greater likelihood was that he had fallen into mere idleness. It was significant of her feeling towards him that she never made surmises as to how he spent his leisure; her thoughts, consciously and unconsciously, avoided such reflections; it was a matter that did not concern her. He had now a number of companions, men of whom her own knowledge was very vague; that they were not considered suitable acquaintances for her, of course meant that Reuben could have no profit from them, and would probably suffer from their contact. But in these

things she had long been passive, careless. Experience had taught her how easy it was for husband and wife to live parted lives, even whilst their domestic habits seemed the same as ever; in books, that situation had formerly struck her as inconceivable, but now she suspected that it was the commonest of the results of marriage. Habit, habit; how strong it is!

And how degrading! To it she attributed this bluntness in her faculties of perception and enjoyment, this barrenness of the world about her. It was dreadful to look forward upon a tract of existence thus vulgarized. Already she recognized in herself the warnings of a possible future in which she would have lost her intellectual ambitions. There is a creeping paralysis of the soul, and did she not experience its symptoms? Already it was hard to apply herself to any study that demanded real effort; she was failing to pursue her Latin; she avoided German books, because they were more exacting than French; her memory had lost

something of its grasp. Was she to become a woman of society, a refined gossip, a pretentious echo of the reviews and of clever people's talk? If not, assuredly she must exert a force of character which she had begun to suspect was not in her.

It would have helped her so, could she have confided in any true and strong friend. But there was no one to whom she could reveal herself. Her aunt was the last person for such confidences; here again habit was the link, and no deep sympathy. It might be that Mrs. Lessingham, with her knowledge of the world, had a suspicion of the state of things, and for that very reason Cecily veiled herself in their intercourse. They scarcely ever spoke of Reuben. Mrs. Spence might become a real friend, but Cecily shrank with shame from the thought of confessing to her. She desired to stand high in Eleanor's opinion, and weakness had no claim to respect.

Strange that the one person to whom she had disclosed something of her real

mind was also the one who seemed at the greatest distance from her in this circle of friends. Involuntarily, she had spoken to Miriam as to no one else. This might be a result of old associations. But had it a connection with that curious surmise she had formed during the first hour of her conversation with the Spences, and with Miriam herself—that an unexpected intimacy was coming about between Miriam and Mallard? For, in her frequent thoughts of Mallard, she had necessarily wondered whether he would ever perceive the true issue of her self-will; and, so far from desiring to blind him, she had almost a hope that one day he might know how her life had shaped itself. Mallard's position in her mind was a singular one; in some such way she might have regarded a brother who had always lived remote from her, but whom she had every reason to love and reverence. Her esteem for him was boundless; he was the ideal of the artist, and at the same time of the nobly strong man.

Had such a thing been possible, she would have sought to make *him* her confidant. However it was to be explained, she felt no wound to her self-respect in supposing him cognizant of all her sufferings; rather, a solace, a source of strength.

Was it, in a measure, woman's gratitude for love? In the course of three years she had seen many reasons for believing that Reuben was right; that the artist had loved her, and gone through dark struggles when her fate was being decided. That must have added tenderness to her former regard and admiration. But she was glad that he had now recovered his liberty; the first meeting, his look and the grasp of his hand, told her at once that the trouble was long gone by. She was glad of this, and the proof of her sincerity came when she watched the relations between him and Miriam.

On the last evening, Miriam came to her room, carrying a small portfolio, which she opened before her, disclosing three water-colours.

“You have bought them?” Cecily asked, as the other said nothing.

“No. Mr. Mallard has given me them,” was the answer, in a voice which affected a careless pleasure.

“They are admirable. I am delighted that you take such a present away with you.”

How strange it was, if one thought of Mallard and Miriam when they first met at Naples! Cecily expected no confidences, and received none; she could only puzzle over the problem. Miriam had become even more interesting than the late development made her. But why did she behave with so strange a coldness? Her new way of regarding life ought to have resulted in her laying aside that austerity. Mrs. Lessingham hinted an opinion that the change did not go very deep; Puritanism, the result of birth and breeding, was not so easily eradicated.

Mallard stayed on in Rome, but during this next week Cecily only saw him twice—

the first time, for a quarter of an hour on the Pincio; then in the Forum. On that second occasion he was invited to dine with them at the hotel the next day, Mr. Seaborne's company having also been requested. The result was a delightful evening. Seaborne was just now busy with a certain period of Papal history; he talked of some old books he had been reading in the Vatican library, and revealed a world utterly strange to all his hearers.

Here were men who used their lives to some purpose; who not only planned, but executed. When the excitement of the evening had subsided, Cecily thought with more bitterness than ever yet of the contrast between such workers and her husband. The feeling which had first come upon her intensely when she stood before Mallard's picture at the Academy was now growing her habitual mood. She had shut herself out for ever from close communion with this world of genuine activity; she could only regard it from behind a barrier, instead of

warming her heart and brain in free enjoyment of its emotions. And the worst of it was that these glimpses harmed her, injured her morally. One cannot dwell with discontent and keep a healthy imagination. She knew her danger, and it increased the misery with which she looked forward.

Another week, and again there was a chance meeting with Mallard, this time on the Via Appia, where Cecily and her aunt were driving. They spent a couple of hours together. At the parting, Mallard announced that the next day would see him on his journey to London.





CHAPTER X.

ELGAR AT WORK.

AT Dover it was cold and foggy ; the shore looked mildewed, the town rain-soaked and mud-stained. In London, a solid leaden sky lowered above the streets, neither threatening rain nor allowing a hope of sunlight. What a labour breathing had become !

“My heart warms to my native land,” said Spence. “This is a spring day that recalls one’s youth.”

Eleanor tried to smile, but the railway journey had depressed her beneath the possibility of joking. Miriam was pallid and miserable ; she had scarcely spoken since she set foot on the steamboat. Cab-borne through the clangorous streets, they seemed a party of exiles.

The house in Chelsea, which the Spences held on a long lease, had been occupied during their absence by Edward's brother-in-law and his family. Vacated, swept, and garnished, the old furniture from the Pantechicon re-established somewhat at haphazard, it was not a home that welcomed warmly; but one could heap coals on all the fires, and draw down the blinds as soon as possible, and make a sort of Christmas evening. If only one's lungs could have free play! But in a week or so such little incommunities would become natural again.

Miriam had decided that in a day or two she would go down to Bartles; not to stay there, but merely to see her relative, Mrs. Fletcher, and Redbeck House. Before leaving London, she must visit Reuben; she had promised Cecily to do so without delay. This same evening she posted a card to her brother, asking him to be at home to see her early the next morning.

She reached Belsize Park at ten o'clock, and dismissed the cab as soon as she had

alighted from it. Her ring at the door was long in being answered, and the maid-servant who at last appeared did small credit to the domestic arrangements of the house—she was slatternly, and seemed to resent having her morning occupations, whatever they were, thus disturbed. Miriam learnt with surprise that Mr. Elgar was not at home.

“He is out of town?”

The servant thought so; he had not been at the house for two days.

“You are unable to tell me when he will return?”

Mr. Elgar was often away for a day or two, but not for longer than that. The probability was that he would, at all events, look in before evening, though he might go away again.

Miriam left a card—which the servant inspected with curiosity before the door was closed—and turned to depart. It was raining, and very windy. She had to walk some distance before she could find a con-

veyance, and all the way she suffered from a painful fluttering of the heart, an agitation like that of fear. All night she had wished she had never returned to England, and now the wish became a dread of remaining.

By the last post that evening came a note from Reuben. He wrote in manifest hurry, requesting her to come again next morning; he would have visited her himself, but perhaps she had not a separate sitting-room, and he preferred to talk with her in privacy.

So in the morning she again went to Belsize Park. This time the servant was a little tidier, and behaved more conventionally. Miriam was conducted to the library, where Reuben awaited her.

They examined each other attentively. Miriam was astonished to find her brother looking at least ten years older than when she last saw him; he was much sparer in body, had duller eyes and, it seemed to her, thinner hair.

“But why didn’t you write sooner to let

me know you were coming?" was his first exclamation.

"I supposed you knew from Cecily."

"I haven't heard from her since the letter in which she told me she had got to Rome. She said you would be coming soon, but that was all. I don't understand this economy of postage!"

He grew more annoyed as he spoke. Meeting Miriam's eye, he added, in the tone of explanation:

"It's abominable that you should come here all the way from Chelsea, and be turned away at the door! What did the servant tell you?"

"Only that your comings and goings were very uncertain," she replied, looking about the room.

"Yes, so they are. I go now and then to a friend's in Surrey and stop overnight. One can't live alone for an indefinite time. But sit down. Unless you'd like to have a look at the house, first of all?"

"I'll sit a little first."

"This is my study, when I'm working at home," Reuben continued, walking about and handling objects, a book, or a pen, or a paper-knife. "Comfortable, don't you think? I want to have another bookcase over there. I haven't worked here much since Cecily has been away; I have a great deal of reading to do at the Museum, you know.—You look a vast deal better, Miriam. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. Most likely I shall continue to live with the Spences."

"You wouldn't care to come here?"

"Thank you; I think the other arrangement will be better."

"Perhaps so. For one thing, it's quite uncertain whether we shall keep this house. It's really a good deal too large for us; an unnecessary expense. If Cecily is often to be away like this, there's no possibility of keeping the place in order. How the servants live, or what they do, I have no idea. How can I be expected to look after such things?"

“But surely it is not expected of you? I understood that Cecily had left a house-keeper.”

“Oh yes; but I have a suspicion that she does little but eat and drink. I know the house is upside down. It’s long enough since I had a decent meal here. Practically I have taken to eating at restaurants. Of course I say nothing about it to Cecily; what’s the use of bothering her? By-the-bye, how is she? How did you leave her?”

“Not very well, I’m afraid.”

“She never says a word about her health. But then, practically, she never writes. I doubt whether London suits her. We shall have to make our head-quarters in Paris, I fancy; she was always well enough there. Of course I can’t abandon London entirely; at all events, not till I’ve—till my materials for the book are all ready; but it’s simple enough for me to come and take lodgings for a month now and then.”

Miriam gave an absent “Yes.”

“You don’t seem to have altered much,

after all," he resumed, looking at her with a smile. "You talk to me just like you used to. I expected to find you more cheerful."

Miriam showed a forced smile, but answered nothing.

"Well, did you see much of Mallard?" he asked, throwing himself into a seat impatiently, and beginning to rap his knee with the paper-knife.

"Not very much."

"Has he come back with you?"

"Oh no; he is still in Rome. He said that he would most likely return when the others did."

"How do he and Cecily get on together?"

"They seemed to be quite friendly."

"Indeed? Does he go about with them?"

"I don't know."

"But did he when you were there?"

"I think he was with them at the Vatican once."

Elgar heard it with indifference. He was silent for a minute or two; then, quitting his chair, asked:

“Had you much talk with her?”

“With Cecily? We were living together, you know.”

“Yes, but had she much to tell you? Did she talk about how things were going with us—what I was doing, and so on?”

He was never still. Now he threw himself into another chair, and strummed with his fingers on the arm of it.

“She told me about your work.”

“And showed that she took very little interest in it, no doubt?”

Miriam gazed at him.

“Why do you think that?”

“Oh, that’s tolerably well understood between us.” Again he rose, and paced with his hands in his pockets. “It was a misfortune that Clarence died. Now she has nothing to occupy herself with. She doesn’t seem to have any idea of employing her time. It was bad enough when the child was living, but since then——”

He spoke as though the hints fell from him involuntarily; he wished to be under-

stood as implying no censure, but merely showing an unfortunate state of things. When he broke off, it was with a shrug and a shake of the head.

“But I suppose she reads a good deal?” said Miriam; “and has friends to visit?”

“She seems to care very little about reading nowadays. And as for the friends—yes, she is always going to some house or other. Perhaps it would have been better if she had had no friends at all.”

“You mean that they are objectionable people?”

“Oh no; I don’t mean to say anything of that kind. But—well, never mind, we won’t talk about it.”

He threw up an arm, and began to pace the floor again. His nervousness was increasing. In a few moments he broke out in the same curious tone, which was half complaining, half resigned.

“You know Cecily, I dare say. She has a good deal of—well, I won’t call it vanity,

because that has a vulgar sound, and she is never vulgar. But she likes to be admired by clever people. One must remember how young she still is. And that's the very thing of which she can't endure to be reminded. If I hint a piece of counsel, she feels it an insult. I suppose I am to blame myself, in some things. When I was working here of an evening, now and then I felt it a bore to have to dress and go out. I don't care much for society, that's the fact of the matter. But I couldn't bid her stay at home. You see how things get into a wrong course. A girl of her age oughtn't to be going about alone among all sorts of people. Of course something had to precede that. The first year or two, she didn't want any society. I suppose a man who studies much always runs the danger of neglecting his home affairs. But it was her own wish that I should begin to work. She was incessantly urging me to it. One of the inconsistencies of women, you see."

He laughed unmelodiously, and then there was a long silence. Miriam, who watched him mechanically, though her eyes were not turned directly upon him, saw that he seated himself on the writing-table, and began to make idle marks with a pencil on the back of an envelope.

"Why didn't you go abroad with her?" she asked in a low voice.

"I would have gone, if it hadn't been quite clear that she preferred not to have my company."

"Are you speaking the truth?"

"What do you mean, Miriam? She preferred to go alone; I know she did."

"But didn't you make the excuse to her that you couldn't leave your work?"

"That's true also. Could I say plainly that I saw what she wished?"

"I think it very unlikely that you were right," Miriam rejoined in a tone of indecision.

"What reason have you for saying that?"

“ You ought to have a very good reason before you believe the contrary.”

She waited for him to reply, but he had taken another piece of paper, and seemed absorbed in covering it with a sort of pattern of his own design.

“ Right or wrong, what does it matter ?” he exclaimed at length, flinging the pencil away. “ The event is the same, in any case. Does it depend on myself how I act, or what I think ? Do you believe still that we are free agents, and responsible for our acts and thoughts ? ”

Miriam avoided his look, and said carelessly :

“ I know nothing about it.”

He gave a short laugh.

“ Well, that’s better and more honest than saying you believe what is contrary to all human experience. Look back on your life. Has its course been of your own shaping ? Compare yourself of to-day with yourself of four years ago ; has the change come about by your own agency ? If you

are *wrong*, are you to blame? Imagine some fanatic seizing you by the arm, and shouting to you to beware of the precipice to which you are advancing——”

He suited the action to the word, and grasped her wrist. Miriam shook him off angrily.

“What do you know of *me*?” she exclaimed, with suppressed scorn.

“True. Just as little as you know of me, or any one person of any other. However, I was speaking of what you know of yourself. I suppose you can look back on one or two things in your life of which your judgment doesn’t approve? Do you imagine they could have happened otherwise than they did? Do you think it lay in your own power to take the course you now think the better?”

Miriam stood up impatiently, and showed no intention of replying. Again Elgar laughed, and waved his arm as if dismissing a subject of thought.

“Come up and look at the drawing-room,” he said, walking to the door.

"Some other time. I'll come again in a few days."

"As you please. But you must take your chance of finding me at home, unless you give me a couple of days' notice."

"Thank you," she answered coldly. "I will take my chance."

He went with her to the front door. With his hand on the latch, he said in an undertone :

"Shall you be writing to Cecily ?"

"I think not ; no."

"All right. I'll let her know you called."

For Miriam, this interview was confirmation of much that she had suspected. She believed now that Reuben and his wife, if they had not actually agreed to live apart, were practically in the position of people who have. The casual reference to a possible abandonment of their house meant more than Reuben admitted. She did not interpret the situation as any less

interested person, with her knowledge of antecedents, certainly would have done ; that is to say, conclude that Reuben was expressing his own desires independently of those which Cecily might have formed. Her probing questions, in which she had seemed to take Cecily's side, were in reality put with a perverse hope of finding that such a view was untenable, and she came away convinced that this was the case. The state of things at home considered, Cecily would not have left for so long an absence but on her own wish.

And, this determined, she thought with increased bitterness of Mallard's remaining in Rome. He too could not but suspect the course that Cecily's married life was taking ; by this time he might even know with certainty. How would that affect him ? In her doubt as to how far the exchange of confidences between Cecily and Mallard was a possible thing, she tortured herself with picturing the progress of their intercourse at Rome, inventing chance encounters, im-

aging conversations. Mrs. Lessingham was as good as no obstacle to their intimacy ; her, Miriam distrusted profoundly. Judging by her own impulses—as we are all apt to do, alike in great and little things—she attributed to Cecily a strong desire for Mallard's sustaining companionship ; and on the artist's side, she judged all but inevitable, under such circumstances, a revival of that passion she had read in his face long ago. Her ingenuity of self-torment went so far as to interpret Mallard's behaviour to herself in a dishonourable sense. It is doubtful whether any one who loves passionately fulfils the ideal of being unable to see the object of love in any but a noble light ; this is one of the many conventions, chiefly of literary origin, which to the eyes of the general make cynicism of wholesome truth. Miriam deemed it not impossible that Mallard had made her his present of pictures simply to mislead her thought when she was gone. Jealousy can sink to baser imaginings than this. It is

only calm affection that judges always in the spirit of pure sympathy.

On the following day, the Spences dined from home, and Miriam, who had excused herself from accompanying them, sat through the evening in their drawing-room. The weather was wretched; a large fire made the comfort within contrast pleasantly enough with sounds of wind and rain against the house. Miriam's mind was far away from Chelsea; it haunted the Via del Babuino, and the familiar rooms of the hotel where Cecily was living. Just after the clock had struck ten, a servant entered and said that Mr. Elgar wished to see her.

Reuben was in evening dress.

"What! you are alone?" he said on entering. "I'm glad of that. I supposed I should have to meet the people. I want to kill half an hour, that's all."

He drew a small low chair near to hers, and, when he had seated himself, took one of her hands. Miriam glanced at him with surprise, but did not resist him. His

cheeks were flushed, perhaps from the cold wind, and there was much more life in his eyes than the other morning.

“You’re a lonely girl, Miriam,” he let fall idly, after musing. “I’m glad I happened to come in, to keep you company. What have you been thinking about?”

“Italy,” she answered, with careless truth.

“Italy, Italy! Who doesn’t think of Italy? I wish I knew Italy as well as you do. Isn’t it odd that I should be saying that to you? I believe you are now far my superior in all knowledge that is worth having. Did I mention that Ciss wrote an account of you in the letter just after she had reached Rome?”

Miriam made an involuntary movement as if to withdraw her hand, but overcame herself before she had succeeded.

“How did she come to know me so quickly?” was her question, murmured absently.

“From Mrs. Spence, it seemed. Come,

tell me what you have been doing this long time. You have seen Greece, too. I must go to Greece—perhaps before the end of this year. I'll make a knapsack ramble : Greece, Egypt, Asia Minor, Constantinople."

Miriam kept silence, and her brother appeared to forget that he had said anything that required an answer. Presently he released her hand, after patting it, and moved restlessly in his chair ; then he looked at his watch, and compared it curiously with the clock on the mantelpiece.

"Ciss," he began suddenly, and at once with a laugh corrected himself. "Miriam, I mean."

"What?"

"I forget what I was going to say," he muttered, after delaying. "But that reminds me ; I've been anxious lest you should misunderstand what I said yesterday. You didn't think I wished to make charges against Cecily?"

"It's difficult to understand you," was all she replied.

"But you mustn't think that I misjudge her. Cecily has more than realized all I imagined her to be. There are few women living who could be called her equals. I say this in the gravest conviction; this is the simple result of my knowledge of her. She has an exquisite nature, an admirable mind. I have never heard her speak a sentence that was unworthy of her, not one!"

His voice trembled with earnestness. Miriam looked at him from under her eyebrows.

"If any one," he pursued, "ever threw doubt on the perfect uprightness of Cecily's conduct, her absolute honour, I would gage my life upon the issue."

And in this moment he spoke with sincerity, whatever the mental process which had brought him to such an utterance. Even Miriam could not doubt him. His clenched fist quivered as it lay on his knee, and the gleam of firelight showed that his eyes were moist.

"Why do you say this?" his sister asked, still scrutinizing him.

“To satisfy myself; to make you understand once for all what I *do* believe. Have you any other opinion of her, Miriam?”

She gave a simple negative.

“I am not saying this,” he pursued, “in the thought that you will perhaps repeat it to her some day. It is for my own satisfaction. If I could put it more strongly, I would; but I will have nothing to do with exaggerations. The truth is best expressed in the simplest words.”

“What do you mean by honour?” Miriam inquired, when there had been a short silence.

“Honour?”

“Your definitions are not generally those accepted by most people.”

“I hope not.” He smiled. “But you know sufficiently what I mean. Deception, for instance, is incompatible with what I understand as honour.”

He spoke it slowly and clearly, his eyes fixed on the fire.

“You seem to me to be attributing moral responsibility to her.”

“What I say is this : that I believe her nature incapable of admitting the vulgar influences to which people in general are subject. I attach no merit to her high qualities—no more than I attach merit to the sea for being a nobler thing than a muddy puddle. Of course I know that she cannot help being what she is, and cannot say to herself that in future she will become this or that. How am I inconsistent ? Suppose me wrong in my estimate of her. I might then lament that she fell below what I had imagined, but of course I should have no right to blame her.”

Marian reflected ; then put the question :

“And does she hold the same opinion—with reference to you, for instance ?”

“Theoretically she does.”

“Theoretically ? If she made her opinions practical, I suppose there would be no reason why you shouldn’t live together in contentment ?”

Reuben glanced at her.

“I can’t say,” he replied gloomily.
“That is quite another matter.”

“Speaking of honour,” said Miriam, “you would attach no blame to yourself if you fell below it.”

He replied with deliberation :

“One often blames one’s self emotionally, but the understanding is not affected by that. Unless your mind is unsteadied by excess of feeling.”

“I believe you are a victim of sophistry—sophistry of the most dangerous kind. I can’t argue with you, but I pity you, and fear for you.”

The words were uttered so solemnly that Reuben for a moment was shaken ; his features moved in a way which indicates a sudden failure of self-possession. But he recovered himself immediately, and smiled his least amiable smile.

“I see you are not yet past the half-way house on the way of emancipation, Miriam. These things sound disagreeable, and prompt such deliverances as this of yours. But can

I help it if a truth is unpalatable ? What better should I be if I shut my eyes against it ? You will say that this conviction makes me incapable of struggle for the good. Nothing of the kind. Where I am destined to struggle, I do so, without any reference to my scientific views. Of course, one is unhappier with science than without it. Who ever urged the contrary, that was worth listening to ? I believe the human race will be more and more unhappy as science grows. But am I on that account likely to preach a crusade against it ? Sister mine, we are what we are ; we think and speak and do what causation determines. If you can still hold another belief, do so, and be thrice blessed. I would so gladly see you happy, dear Miriam."

Again he took her hand, and pressed it against his cheek. Miriam looked straight before her with wide, almost despairing eyes.

"I must go, this moment," Elgar said, happening to notice the time. "Say I have been here, and couldn't wait for

their return ; indeed, they wouldn't expect it."

"Wait a few minutes, Reuben."

She retained his hand.

"I can't dear ; I can't." His cheeks were hot. "I have an appointment."

"What appointment ? With whom ?"

"A friend. It is something important. I'll tell you another time."

"Tell me now. Your sister is more to you than a friend. I ask you to stay with me, Reuben."

In his haste, he did not understand how great an effort over herself such words as these implied. The egoist rarely is moved to wonder at unusual demonstrations made on his own behalf. Miriam was holding his hand firmly, but he broke away. Then he turned back, took her in his arms, and kissed her more tenderly than he ever had done since he was a child. Miriam had a smile of hope, but only for a moment. After all, he was gone.



CHAPTER XI.

IN DUE COURSE.

A CHANGE of trains, and half an hour's delay, at Manchester, then on through Lancashire civilization, through fumes and evil smells and expanses of grey-built hideousness, as far as the station called Bartles.

Miriam remarked novelties as she alighted. The long wooden platform, which used to lie almost bare, was now in part sheltered by a structure of iron and glass. There was a bookstall. Porters were more numerous. The old station-master still bustled about ; he recognized her with a stare of curiosity, but did not approach to speak, as formerly he would have done. Miriam affected not to observe him ; he had been wont to sit in the same chapel with her.

The wooden stairs down into the road

were supplanted by steps of stone, and below waited several cabs, instead of the two she remembered. "To Redbeck House." The local odours were, at all events, the same as ever ; with what intensity they revived the past ! Every well-known object, every familiar face, heightened the intolerable throbbing of her heart ; so that at length she drew herself into a corner of the cab and looked at nothing.

In the house itself nothing was new ; even the servants were the same Miriam had left there. Mrs. Fletcher lived precisely the life of three and a half years ago, down to the most trivial habit ; used the same phrases, wore the same kind of dress. To Miriam everything seemed unreal, visionary ; her own voice sounded strange, for it was out of harmony with this resuscitated world. She went up to the room prepared for her, and tried to shake off the nightmare oppression. The difficulty was to keep a natural consciousness of her own identity. Above all, the scents in the air disturbed her, confused

her mind, forced her to think in forgotten ways about the things on which her eyes fell.

The impressions of every moment were disagreeable, now and then acutely painful. To what purpose had she faced this experience? She might have foreseen what the result would be, and her presence here was unnecessary.

But in an hour, when her pulse again beat temperately, she began to adjust the relations between herself and these surroundings. They no longer oppressed her; the sense of superiority which had been pleasant at a distance re-established itself, and gave her a defiant strength such as she had hoped for. So far from the anxieties of her conscience being aggravated by return to Bartles, she could not recover that mode of feeling which had harassed her for the last few months. Like so many other things, it had become insubstantial. It might revive, but for the present she was safe against it.

And this self-possession was greatly aided

by Mrs. Fletcher's talk. From her sister-in-law's letters, though for the last two years they had been few, Miriam had formed some conception of the progress of Bartles opinion concerning herself. Now she led Mrs. Fletcher to converse with native candour on this subject, and in the course of the evening, which they spent alone, all the town's gossip since Miriam's going abroad was gradually reported. Mrs. Fletcher was careful to prevent the inference (which would have been substantially correct) that she herself had been the source of such rumours as had set wagging the tongues of dissident Bartles; she spoke with much show of reluctance, and many protestations of the wrath that had been excited in her by those who were credulous of ill. Miriam confined herself to questioning; she made no verbal comments. But occasionally she averted her face with a haughty smile.

Mrs. Welland, the once-dreaded rival, had established an unassailable supremacy. From her, according to Mrs. Fletcher, proceeded

most of the scandalous suggestions which had attached themselves to Mrs. Baske's name. This lady had not scrupled to state it as a fact in her certain knowledge that Mrs. Baske was become a Papist. To this end, it seemed, was the suspicion of Bartles mainly directed—the Scarlet Woman throned by the Mediterranean had made a victim of her who was once a light in the re-reformed faith. That was the reason, said Mrs. Welland, why the owner of Redbeck House continued to dwell in foreign parts. If ever she came back at all, it would be as an insidious enemy ; but more likely she would never return ; possibly her life would close in a convent, like that of other hapless Englishwomen whose personal property excited the covetousness of the Pope. In the Bartles newspaper there had appeared, from time to time, enigmatic paragraphs, which Mrs. Welland and her intimates made the subject of much gossip ; these passages alluded either to a certain new chapel which seemed very long in getting its foundations

laid, or to a certain former inhabitant of Bartles, who found it necessary, owing to the sad state of her health, to make long residence in Roman Catholic countries. Mrs. Fletcher had preserved these newspapers, and now produced them. Miriam read and smiled.

“Why didn’t it occur to them to suggest that I had become an atheist?”

Mrs. Fletcher screamed with horror. No, no; Bartles did not contain any one so malicious as that. After all, whatever had been said was merely the outcome of a natural disappointment. All would be put right again. To-morrow was Sunday, and when Miriam appeared in the chapel——

“I have no intention of going to chapel.”

On Monday morning she returned to London. Excepting Mrs. Fletcher and her daughters, she had spoken with no one in Bartles. She came away with a contemptuous hatred of the place—a resolve never to see it again.

This had been the one thing needed to make Miriam as intolerant in agnosticism as she formerly was in dogma. Henceforth she felt the animosity of a renegade. In the course of a few hours her soul had completed its transformation, and at the incitement of that pride which had always been the strongest motive within her. Her old faith was now identified with the cackle of Bartles, and she flung it behind her with disdain.

Not that she felt insulted by the supposition that she had turned Romanist. No single reason would account for her revolt, which, coming thus late, was all but as violent as that which had animated her brother from his boyhood. Intellectual progress had something to do with it, for on approaching with new eyes that narrow provincial life, she could scarcely believe it had once been her own, and resented the memory of such a past. But less worthy promptings were more strongly operative. The Bartles folk had a certain measure of

right against her ; she had ostentatiously promised them a chapel, and how was her failure in keeping the promise to be accounted for ? This justification of theirs chafed her ; she felt the ire of one who has no right to be angry. It shamed her, moreover, to be reminded of the pretentious spirit which was the origin of this trouble ; and to be shamed by her inferiors was to Miriam a venomed stab. Then, again, she saw no way of revenging herself. Had she this morning possessed the power of calling down fire from heaven, Lancashire would shortly have missed one of its ugliest little towns ; small doubt of that.

No wonder a grave old gentleman who sat opposite on the journey to London was constrained frequently to look at her. As often as she forgot herself, the wrathful arrogance which boiled in her heart was revealed on her features ; the strained brow, the flashing eyes, the stern-set lips, made a countenance not often to be studied in the railway-carriage.

It was with distinct pleasure that she found herself again in London. Contrasted with her homes in the south, London had depressed and discouraged her ; but in this also did the visit to Bartles change her feeling. She understood now what had determined the Spences to make their abode once more in London. She too was in need of tonics for the mind. The roar of the streets was grateful to her ; it seemed to lull the painful excitement in which she had travelled, and at the same time to stimulate her courage. Yes, she could face miseries better in London, after all. She could begin to work again, and make lofty that edifice of anti-dogmatic scorn which had now such solid foundations.

She allowed nearly a week to pass before writing to Reuben. When at length she sent a note, asking him either to come and see her or to make an appointment, it remained unanswered for three days ; then arrived a few hurried lines, in which he

said that he had been out of town, and was again on the point of leaving home, but he hoped to see her before long. She waited, always apprehensive of ill. What she divined of her brother's life was inextricably mingled with the other causes of her suffering.

One afternoon she returned from walking on the Chelsea Embankment, and, on reaching the drawing-room door, which was ajar, heard a voice that made her stand still. She delayed an instant; then entered, and found Eleanor in conversation with Mallard.

He had been in London, he said, only a day or two. Miriam inquired whether Mrs. Lessingham and Cecily had also left Rome. Not yet, he thought, but certainly they would be starting in a few days. The conversation then went on between Mallard and Eleanor; Miriam, holding a cup of tea, only gave a brief reply when it was necessary.

“And now,” said Eleanor, “appoint a day for us to come and see your studio.”

"You shall appoint it yourself."

"Then let us say to-morrow."

In speaking, Eleanor turned interrogatively to Miriam, who, however, said nothing. Mallard addressed her.

"May I hope that you will come, Mrs. Baske?"

His tone was, to her ear, as unsatisfying as could be; he seemed to put the question under constraint of civility. But, of course, only one answer was possible.

So next day this visit was paid; Spence also came. Mallard had made preparations. A tea-service which would not have misbecome Eleanor's own drawing-room stood in readiness. Pictures were examined, tea was taken, artistic matters were discussed.

And Miriam went away in uttermost discontent. She felt that henceforth her relations with Mallard were established on a perfectly conventional basis. Her dreams were left behind in Rome. Here was no Vatican in which to idle and hope for possible meetings. The holiday was over.

Everything seemed of a sudden so flat and commonplace, that even her jealousy of Cecily faded for lack of sustenance.

Then she received a letter from Cecily herself, announcing return within a week. From Reuben she had even yet heard nothing.

A few days later, as she was reading in her room between tea and dinner-time, Eleanor came in ; she held an evening newspaper, and looked very grave—more than grave. Miriam, as soon as their eyes met, went pale with misgiving.

“There’s something here,” Eleanor began, “that I must show you. If I said nothing about it, you would see it all the same. Sooner or later, we should speak of it.”

“What is it ? About whom ?” Miriam asked, with fearful impatience, half rising.

“Your brother.”

Miriam took the paper, and read what was indicated. It was the report of a discreditable affair—in journalistic language, a *fracas*—that had happened the previous

night at Notting Hill. A certain music-hall singer, a lady who had of late achieved popularity, drove home about midnight, accompanied by a gentleman whose name was also familiar to the public—at all events, to that portion of it which reads society journals and has an interest in race-horses. The pair had just alighted at the house door, when they were hurriedly approached by another gentleman, who made some remark to the songstress ; whereupon the individual known to fame struck him smartly with his walking-stick. The result was a personal conflict, a rolling upon the pavement, a tearing of shirt-collars, and the opportune arrival of police. The gentleman whose interference had led to the *rencontre*—again to borrow the reporter's phrase—and who was charged with assault by the other, at first gave a false name ; it had since transpired that he was a Mr. R. Elgar, of Belsize Park.

Miriam laid down the paper. She had overcome her extreme agitation, but there

was hot shame on her cheeks. She tried to smile.

“One would think he had contrived it for his wife’s greeting on her return.”

Eleanor was silent.

“I am not much surprised,” Miriam added. “Nor you either, I dare say?”

“I have felt uneasy ; but I never pictured anything like this. Can we do anything ? Shall you go and see him ?”

“No.”

They sat for some minutes without speaking ; then Miriam exclaimed angrily :

“What right had she to go abroad alone ?”

“For anything we know, Miriam, she may have had only too good reason.”

“Then I don’t see that it matters.”

Eleanor sighed, and, after a little lingering, but without further speech, went from the room.

In the mean time, Spence had entered the house. Eleanor met him in the drawing-room, and held the paper to him, with a

silent indication of the paragraph. He read, and with an exclamation of violent disgust threw the thing aside. His philosophy failed him for once.

“What a blackguardly affair ! Does Miriam know ?”

“I have just shown it her. Evidently she had a suspicion of what was going on.”

Spence muttered a little ; then regained something of his usual equanimity.

“Our conjectures may be right,” he said.
“Perhaps no revelation awaits her.”

“I begin to think it very likely. Oh, it is hateful, vile ! She oughtn’t to return to him.”

“Pray, what is she to do ?”

“I had rather she died than begin such a life !”

“I see no help for her. Her lot is that of many a woman no worse than herself. We both foresaw it ; Mallard foresaw it.”

“I am afraid to look forward. I don’t think she is the kind of woman to forgive

again and again. This will revolt her, and there is no telling what she may do."

"It is the old difficulty. Short of killing herself, whatever she does will be the beginning of worse things. In this respect, there's no distinction between Cecily and the wife of the costermonger. Civilization is indifferent. Her life is ruined, and there's an end on't."

Eleanor turned away. Her eyes were wet with tears of indignant sympathy.





CHAPTER XII.

CECILY'S RETURN.

ON alighting at Charing Cross, Cecily searched the platform for Reuben. There could be no doubt of his coming to meet her, for she had written to tell him that Mrs. Lessingham would at once go into the country from another station, and she would thus be alone. But she looked about and waited in vain. In the end she took a cab, parted with her companion, and drove homewards.

It was more than a trivial disappointment. On the journey, she had felt a longing for home, a revival of affection; she had tried to persuade herself that this long separation would have made a happy change, and that their life might take a new colour. Had Reuben appeared at the

station, she would have pressed his hand warmly. Her health had improved ; hope was again welcome. It came not like the hope of years ago, radiant, with eyes of ecstasy ; but sober, homely, a gentle smile on its compassionate lips.

His failure would easily be explained ; either he had mistaken the train, or something inevitable had hindered him ; possibly she had made a slip of the pen in writing. Nearing home, she grew tremulous, nervously impatient. Before the cab had stopped, she threw the door open.

The servant who admitted her wore an unusual expression, but Cecily did not observe this.

“ Mr. Elgar is at home ? ”

“ No, ma'am.”

“ When did he go out ? ”

“ He has not been at home for three days, ma'am.”

Cecily controlled herself.

“ There are some parcels in the cab. Take them upstairs.”

She went into the study, and stood looking about her. On the writing-table lay some unopened letters, all addressed to her husband; also two or three that had been read and thrown aside. Whilst she was still at the mercy of her confused thoughts, the servant came and asked if she would pay the cabman.

Then she ascended to the drawing-room and sat down. Had her letter gone astray? But if he had not been home for three days, and, as appeared, his letters were not forwarded to him, did not this prove (supposing a miscarriage of what she had written) that he was not troubling himself about news from her? If he had received her letter—and it ought to have arrived at least four days ago—what was the meaning of his absence?

She shrunk from questioning the servants further. Presently, without having changed her dress, she went down again to the library, and re-examined the letters waiting to be read; the handwriting was in each

case unknown to her. Then she took up the letters that were open. One was an invitation to dine, one the appeal of some charitable institution ; last, a few lines from Mallard. He wrote asking Elgar to come and see him—seemingly with no purpose beyond a wish to re-establish friendly relations. Cecily read the note again and again, wondering whether it had led to a meeting.

Why had not the housekeeper made her appearance ? She rang the bell, and the woman came. With as much composure as she could command, Cecily inquired whether Mr. Elgar had spoken of her expected arrival. Yes, he had done so ; everything had been made ready. And had he left word when he himself should be back ? No ; he had said nothing.

Naturally, she thought of going to the Spences' ; but her dignity resisted. How could she seek information about her husband from friends ? It was difficult to believe that he kept away voluntarily.

Would he not in any case have sent word, even though the excuse were untruthful? What motive could he have for treating her thus? His last letter was longer and kinder than usual.

She was troubling herself needlessly. The simple explanation was of course the true one. He had been away in the country, and had arranged with himself to be back in time to meet her at the station; then some chance had intervened. Doubtless he would very soon present himself. Her impatience and anxiety would never occur to him; what difference could a few hours make? They were not on such lover-like terms nowadays.

Compelling herself to rest in this view, she made a change of clothing, and again summoned the housekeeper, this time for discussion of domestic details. Cecily had no feminine delight in such matters for their own sake; the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick-maker were necessary evils, to be put out of mind as soon as possible.

She learned incidentally that Reuben had been a great deal from home ; but this did not surprise her. She had never imagined him leading a methodical life, between Belsize Park and the British Museum. That was not in his nature.

At the usual hour she had luncheon. Shortly after, when her patience was yielding to fears—fears which, in truth, she had only masked with the show of explanation—a letter was brought in. But nothing to the purpose. It came from Zillah Denyer, who began with apologies for writing, and expressing uncertainty whether Mrs. Elgar had yet returned from abroad ; then went on to say that her sister Madeline had been suffering dreadfully of late. “ Perhaps you know that Mrs. Travis has left us. Madeline has missed her company very much, and often longs to see the face of some visitor. She speaks of the one visit you paid her, and would so like to see you again. Forgive me for asking if you could spare half an hour. The evening is best ;

I venture to say this, as you came in the evening before."

Cecily forgot herself for a few minutes in sorrows graver than her own. Her impression after the one visit had been that Madeline would not greatly care for her to repeat it; this, it seemed, was a mistake. So Mrs. Travis had left her lodgings? She heard of it for the first time.

About half-past three there sounded the knock of a visitor at the house door. Expecting no one, Cecily had given no directions; the parlour-maid hurried upstairs to ask if she was "at home." She replied that the name must first be announced to her.

It was Mrs. Travis. Cecily hesitated, but decided to receive her.

Though, as you are aware, the intercourse between them had been resumed, it was with a restraint on both sides that seemed to forbid the prospect of friendship. They had met two or three times only; once it was in the Denyers' house, and on that

occasion Cecily had renewed her acquaintance with the family and sat a little with Madeline. Interest in each other they certainly felt, but not in like degrees ; Mrs. Travis showed herself more strongly attracted to Cecily than Cecily was to her, as it had been from the first. That this was the attraction of simple liking and goodwill, Cecily could never quite convince herself. Mrs. Travis always seemed to be studying her, and sometimes in a spirit of curiosity that was disagreeable. But at the same time she was so manifestly in need of sympathetic companionship, and allowed such sad glimpses into her own wrecked life, that Cecily could not reject her, nor even feel with actual coldness.

“ Have you been home long ? ” the visitor asked, as they shook hands.

“ A few hours only.”

“ Indeed ? You have arrived to-day ? ”

They sat down. Mrs. Travis fixed her eyes on Cecily.

“ I hardly hoped to find you.”

“I should have let you know that I was back.”

Their conversations were accustomed to begin awkwardly, constrainedly. They never spoke of ordinary topics, and each seemed to wait for a suggestion of the other's mood. At present Cecily was uneasy under her visitor's gaze, which was stranger and more inquisitive than usual.

“So you have left the Denyers'?” she said.

“From whom did you hear?”

“I have just had a note from Zillah Denyer, about Madeline. She merely mentions that you are no longer there.”

“I ought to go and see them; but I can't to-day.”

“Have you been in London all the time?”

“Yes.—I have gone back to my husband.”

It was spoken in a matter-of-fact tone (obviously assumed) which was very incongruous with the feeling it excited in Cecily. She could not hear the announcement without an astonished look.

"Of your own free will?" she asked, in a diffident voice.

"Oh yes. That is to say, he persuaded me."

Their eyes met, and Cecily had an impulse of distrust, more decided than she had ever felt. She could not find anything to say, and by keeping silence she hoped the interview might be shortened.

"You are disposed to feel contempt for me," Mrs. Travis added, after a few moments.

"No one can judge another in such things. It is your own affair, Mrs. Travis."

"Yes, but you despise me for my weakness, naturally you do. Had you no suspicion that it would end again in this way?"

"I simply believed what you told me."

"That nothing would induce me to return to him. That is how women talk, you know. We are all very much the same."

Again Cecily kept silence. Mrs. Travis, observing her, saw an offended look rise to her face.

“I mean, we are few of us, us women, strong enough to hold out against natural and social laws. We feel indignant, we suffer more than men can imagine, but we have to yield. But it is true that most women are wise enough not to act in my way. You are quite right to despise me.”

“Why do you repeat that? It is possible you are acting quite rightly. How should I be able to judge?”

“I am not acting rightly,” said the other, with bitterness. “Two courses are open to a woman in my position. Either she must suffer in silence, care nothing for the world’s talk, take it for granted that, at any cost, she remains under her husband’s roof; or she must leave him once and for ever, and regard herself as a free woman. The first is the ordinary choice; most women are forced into it by circumstances; very few have courage and strength for the second. But to do first one thing, then the other, to be now weak and now strong, to yield to the world one day and defy it the next,

and then to yield again,—that is base. Such a woman is a traitor to her sex.”

Cecily did not lift her eyes. She heard the speaker's voice tremble, and could not bear to look at her face. Her heart was sinking, though she knew not exactly what oppressed her. There was a long silence ; then Cecily spoke.

“If your husband persuaded you to return, it must have been that you still have affection for him.”

“The feeling is not worthy of that name.”

“That is for yourself to determine. Why should we talk of it ?”

Looking up, Cecily found the other's eyes again fixed on her. It was as though this strange gaze were meant to be a reply.

“Would it not be better,” she continued, “if we didn't speak of these things ? If it could do any good—— But surely it cannot.”

“Sympathy is good—offered or received.”

“I do sympathize with you in your difficulties.”

"But you do not care to receive mine," replied Mrs. Travis, in an undertone.

Cecily gazed at her with changed eyes, inquiring, offended, fearful.

"What need have I of your sympathy, Mrs. Travis?" she asked distantly.

"None, I see," answered the other, with a scarcely perceptible smile.

"I don't understand you. Please let us never talk in this way again."

"Never, if you will first let me say one thing. You remember that Mr. Elgar once had doubts about my character. He was anxious on your account, lest you should be friendly with a person who was not all he could desire from the moral point of view. He did me justice at last, but it was very painful, as you will understand, to be suspected by one who embodies such high morality."

There was no virulence in her tone; she spoke as though quietly defending herself against some unkindness. But Cecily could not escape her eyes, which searched and stabbed.

“Why do you say this?”

“Because I am weak, and therefore envious. Why should you reject my sympathy? I could be a better friend to you than any you have. I myself have no friend; I can't make myself liked. I feel dreadfully alone, without a soul who cares for me. I am my husband's plaything, and of course he scorns me. I am sure he laughs at me with his friends and mistresses. And you too scorn me, though I have tried to make you my friend. Of course it is all at an end between us now. I understand your nature; it isn't quite what I thought.”

Cecily heard, but scarcely with understanding. The word for which she was waiting did not come.

“Why,” she asked, “do you speak of offering me sympathy? What do you hint at?”

“Seriously, you don't know?”

“I don't,” was the cold answer.

“Why did you go abroad without your husband?”

It came upon Cecily with a shock. Were people discussing her, and thus interpreting her actions ?

“Surely that is my own business, Mrs. Travis. I was in poor health, and my husband was too busy to accompany me.”

“That is the simple truth, from *your* point of view ?”

“How have you done me the honour to understand me ?”

Mrs. Travis examined her ; then put another question.

“Have you seen your husband since you arrived ?”

“No, I have not.”

“And you don’t know that he is being talked about everywhere—not exactly for his moral qualities ?”

Cecily was mute. Thereupon Mrs. Travis opened the little sealskin bag that lay on her lap, and took out a newspaper. She held it to Cecily, pointing to a certain report. It was a long account of proceedings at the police-court, resulting from the

incident of which you have heard. Cecily read. When she had come to the end, her eyes remained on the paper. She did not move until Mrs. Travis put out a hand and touched hers ; then she drew back, as in repugnance.

“ You had heard nothing of this ? ”

Cecily did not reply. Thereupon Mrs. Travis again opened her little bag, and took out a cabinet photograph. It represented a young woman in tights, her arms folded, one foot crossed over the other ; the face was vulgarly piquant, and wore a smile which made eloquent declaration of its price.

“ That is the ‘ lady,’ ” said Mrs. Travis, with a slight emphasis on the last word.

Cecily looked for an instant only. There was perfect silence for a minute or two after that ; then Cecily rose. She did not speak ; but the other, also rising, said :

“ I shouldn’t have come if I had known you were still ignorant. But now you can, and will, think the worst of me ; from this day you will hate me.”

“I am not sure,” replied Cecily, “that you haven’t some strange pleasure in what you have been telling me; but I know you are very unhappy, and that alone would prevent me from hating you. I can’t be your friend, it is true; we are too unlike in our tempers and habits of thought. Let us shake hands and say good-bye.”

But Mrs. Travis refused her hand, and with a look of bitter suffering, which tried to appear resignation, went from the room.

Cecily felt a cold burden upon her heart. She sat in a posture of listlessness, corresponding to the weary misery, numbing instead of torturing, which possessed her now that the shock was over. Perhaps the strange manner of the revelation tended to produce this result; the strong self-control which she had exercised, the mingling of incongruous emotions, the sudden end of her expectation, brought about a mood resembling apathy.

She began presently to reflect, to readjust her view of the life she had been

living. It seemed to her now unaccountable that she had been so little troubled with fears. Ignorance of the world had not blinded her, nor was she unaware of her husband's history. But the truth was that she had not cared to entertain suspicion. For a long time she had not seriously occupied her mind with Reuben. Self-absorbed, she was practically content to let happen what would, provided it called for no interference of hers. Her indifference had reached the point of idly accepting the present, and taking for granted that things would always be much the same.

Yet she knew the kind of danger to which Reuben was exposed from the hour when her indifference declared itself; it was present to her imagination when he chose to remain alone in London. But such thoughts were vague, impalpable. She had never realized a picture of such degradation as this which had just stamped itself upon her brain. In her surmises

jealousy had no part, and therefore nothing was conceived in detail. In the certainty that he no longer loved her with love of the nobler kind, did it matter much what he concealed? But this flagrant shame had never threatened her. This was indeed the "experience" in which, as Reuben had insisted, she was lacking.

No difficulty in understanding now why he kept away. Would he ever come? Or had he determined that their life in common was no longer possible, and resolved to spare her the necessity of saying that they were no longer husband and wife? Doubtless that was what he expected to hear from her; his view of her character, which she understood sufficiently well, would lead him to think that.

But she had no impulse to leave his house. The example of Mrs. Travis was too near. Escape, with or without melodramatic notes of farewell, never suggested itself. She knew that it was a practical impossibility to make that absolute sever-

ance of their lives without which they were still man and wife, though at a distance from each other ; they must still be linked by material interests, by common acquaintances. The end of sham heroics would come, sooner or later, in the same way as to Mrs. Travis. How was her life different from what it had been yesterday ? By an addition of shame and scorn, that was all ; actually, nothing was altered. When Reuben heard that she was remaining at home, he would come to her. Perhaps they might go to live in some other place ; that was all.

Tea was brought in, but she paid no heed to it. Sunset and twilight came ; the room grew dusk ; then the servants appeared with lamps. She dined, returned to the drawing-room, and took up a book she had been reading on her journey. It was a volume of Quinet, and insensibly its interest concentrated her attention. She read for nearly two hours.

Then she was tired of it, and began to

move restlessly about. Again she grew impatient of the uncertainty whether Reuben would return to-night. She lay upon a couch and tried to forget herself in recollection of far-off places and people. But instead of the pictures she wished to form, there kept coming before her mind the repulsive photograph which Mrs. Travis had produced. Though she had barely glanced at it, she saw it distinctly—the tawdry costume, the ignoble attitude, the shameless and sordid face. It polluted her imagination.

Jealousy, of a woman such as that? Had she still loved him, she must have broken her heart to think that he could fall so low. If it had been told her that he was overcome by passion for a woman of some nobleness, she could have heard it with resignation; in that there would have been nothing base. But the choice he had made would not allow her even the consolation of reflecting that she felt no jealousy; it compelled her to involve him in the scorn, if not in the

loathing, with which that portrait inspired her.

That he merely had ceased to love her, what right had she to blame him? The very word of "blame" was unmeaning in such reference. In this, at all events, his fatalism had become her own way of thinking. To talk of controlling love is nonsensical; dead love is dead beyond hope. But need one sink into a slough of vileness?

At midnight she went to her bedroom. He would not come now.

Sleep seemed far from her, and yet before the clock struck one she had fallen into a painful slumber. When she awoke, it was to toss and writhe for hours in uttermost misery. She could neither sleep nor command a train of thoughts. At times she sobbed and wailed in her suffering.

No letter arrived in the morning. She could no longer read, and knew not how to pass the hours. In some way she must put at end to her intolerable loneliness, but she could not decide how to act. Reuben might

come to-day ; she wished it, that the meeting might be over and done with.

But the long torment of her nerves had caused a change of mood. She was feverish now, and impatience grew to resentment. The emotions which were yesterday so dulled began to stir in her heart and brain. Walking about the room, unable to occupy herself for a moment, she felt as though fetters were upon her ; this house had become a prison ; her life was that of a captive without hope of release.

There came in her a sudden outbreak of passionate indignation at the unequal hardships of a woman's lot. Often as she had read and heard and talked of this, she seemed to understand it for the first time ; now first was it real to her, in the sense of an ill that goads and tortures. Not society alone was chargeable with the injustice ; nature herself had dealt cruelly with woman. Constituted as she is, limited as she is by inexorable laws, by what refinement of malice is she endowed with energies and

desires like to those of men? She should have been made a creature of sluggish brain, of torpid pulse; then she might have discharged her natural duties without exposure to fever and pain and remorse such as man never knows.

She asked no liberty to be vile, as her husband made himself; but that she was denied an equal freedom to exercise all her powers, to enrich her life with experiences of joy, this fired her to revolt. A woman who belongs to the old education readily believes that it is not to experiences of joy, but of sorrow, that she must look for her true blessedness; her ideal is one of renunciation; religious motive is in her enforced by what she deems the obligation of her sex. But Cecily was of the new world, the emancipated order. For a time she might accept misery as her inalienable lot, but her youthful years, fed with the new philosophy, must in the end rebel.

Could she live with such a man without sooner or later taking a taint of his ignoble-

ness ? His path was downwards, and how could she hope to keep her own course in independence of him ? It shamed her that she had ever loved him. But indeed she had not loved the Reuben that now was ; the better part of him was then predominant. No matter that he was changed ; no matter how low he descended ; she must still be bound to him. Whereas he acknowledged no mutual bond ; he was a man, and therefore in practice free.

Yet she was as far as ever from projecting escape. The unjust law was still a law, and irresistible. Had it been her case that she loved some other man, and his return of love claimed her, then indeed she might dare anything and break her chains. But the power of love seemed as dead in her as the passion she had once, and only once, conceived. She was utterly alone.

Morning and noon went by. She had exhausted herself with ceaseless movement, and now for two or three hours lay on a couch as if asleep. The fever burned upon her forehead and in her breath.

But at length endurance reached its limits. As she lay still, a thought had taken possession of her—at first rejected again and again, but always returning, and with more tempting persistency. She could not begin another night without having spoken to some one. She seemed to have been forsaken for days ; there was no knowing how long she might live here in solitude. When it was nearly five o'clock, she went to her bedroom and prepared for going out.

When ready, she met the servant who was bringing up tea.

“I shall not want it,” she said. “And probably I shall not dine at home. Nothing need be prepared.”

She entered the library, and took up from the writing-table Mallard's note ; she looked at the address that was on it.

Then she left the house, and summoned the first vacant cab,



CHAPTER XIII.

ONWARD TO THE VAGUE.

THE cab drew up in a quiet road in Chelsea, by a gateway opening into a yard. Cecily alighted and paid the driver.

“Be good enough to wait a minute or two,” she said. “I may need you again at once. But if I am longer, I shall not be coming.”

Entering the yard, she came in front of a row of studios; on the door of each was the tenant's name, and she easily discovered that of Ross Mallard. This door was half open; she looked in and saw a flight of stairs. Having ascended these, she came to another door, which was closed. Here her purpose seemed to falter; she looked back, and held her hand for a moment against her cheek. But at length

she knocked. There was no answer. She knocked again, more loudly, leaning forward to listen ; and this time there came a distant shout for reply. Interpreting it as summons to enter, she turned the handle ; the door opened, and she stepped into a little ante-chamber. From a room within came another shout, now intelligible.

“ Who’s there ? ”

She advanced, raised a curtain, and found herself in the studio, but hidden behind some large canvases. There was a sound of some one moving, and when she had taken another step, Mallard himself, pipe in mouth, came face to face with her. With a startled look, he took the pipe from his lips, and stood regarding her ; she met his gaze with the same involuntary steadiness.

“ Are you alone, Mr. Mallard ? ” fell at length from her.

“ Yes. Come and sit down.”

There was a gruffness in the invitation which under ordinary circumstances would have repelled a visitor. But Cecily was

so glad to hear the familiar voice that its tone mattered nothing ; she followed him, and seated herself where he bade her. There was much tobacco-smoke in the air ; Mallard opened a window. She watched him with timid, anxious eyes. Then, without looking at her, he sat down near an easel on which was his painting of the temples of Pæstum. This canvas held Cecily's gaze for a moment.

"When did you get home?" Mallard asked abruptly.

"Yesterday morning."

"Mrs. Lessingham went on, I suppose?"

"Yes. I have been alone ever since, except that a visitor called."

"Alone?"

She met his eyes, and asked falteringly :

"You know why? You have heard about it?"

"Do you mean what happened the other day?" he returned, in a voice that sounded careless, unsympathetic.

"Yes."

"I know of that, of course. Where is your husband?"

"I have neither seen him nor heard from him. I shouldn't have understood why he kept away but for the visitor that came—a lady; she showed me a newspaper."

Mallard knit his brows, and now scowled at her askance, now looked away. His visage was profoundly troubled. There was silence for some moments. Cecily's eyes wandered unconsciously over the paintings and other objects about her.

"You have come to ask me if I know where he is?"

She failed in her attempt to reply.

"I am sorry that I can't tell you. I know nothing of him. But perhaps Mrs. Baske does. You know their address?"

"I didn't come for that," she answered, with decision, her features working painfully. "It is not my part to seek for him."

"Then how can I help you?" Mallard asked, still gruffly, but with more evidence of the feeling that his tone disguised.

“You can’t help me, Mr. Mallard. How could any one help me? I was utterly alone, and I wanted to hear a friend’s voice.”

“That is only natural. It is impossible for you to remain alone. You don’t feel able to go to Mrs. Baske?”

She shook her head.

“But your aunt will come? You have written to her?”

“No. I had rather she didn’t come. It seems strange to you that I should bring my troubles here, when it can only pain you to see me, and to have to speak. But I am not seeking comfort or support—not of the kind you naturally think I need.”

As he watched the workings of her lips, the helpless misery in her young eyes, the endeavour for self-command and the struggles of womanly pride, Mallard remembered how distinctly he had foreseen this in his past hours of anguish. It was hard to grasp the present as a reality; at moments he seemed only to be witnessing the phantoms of his imagination. The

years that had vanished were so insubstantial in memory ; *now* and *then*, what was it that divided the two ? This that was to-day a fact, was it not equally so when Cecily walked by his side at Baiæ ? That which is to come, already is. In the stress of a deep emotion we sometimes are made conscious of this unity of things, and the effect of such spiritual vision is a nobler calm than comes of mere acquiescence in human blindness.

“ I came here,” Cecily was continuing, “ because I had something to say to you—something I shall never say to any one else. You were my guardian when I was a child, and I have always thought of you as more than a simple friend. I want to fulfil a duty to you. I owe you gratitude, and I shall have no rest till I have spoken it—told you how deeply I feel it.”

Mallard interrupted her, for every word seemed to be wrung from her by pain, and he felt like one who listens to a forced confession.

"Don't give way to this prompting," he said, with kind firmness. "I understand, and it is enough. You are not yourself; don't speak whilst you are suffering so."

"My worst suffering would be *not* to speak," she replied, with increased agitation. "I must say what I came to say; then I can go and face whatever is before me. I want to tell you how right you were. You told me through Mrs. Lessingham how strongly you disapproved of my marrying at once; you wished me to take no irrevocable step till I knew myself and him better. You did everything in your power to prevent me from committing a childish folly. But I paid no regard to you. I ought to have held your wish sacred; I owed you respect and obedience. But I chose my own foolish way, and now that I know how right you were, I feel the need of thanking you. You would have saved me if you could. It is a simple duty in me to acknowledge this, now I know it."

Mallard rose and stood for a minute looking absently at the temples. Then he turned gravely towards her.

“If it has really lightened your mind to say this, I am content to have heard it. But let it end there ; there is no good in such thoughts and speeches. They are hysterical, and you don’t like to be thought that. Such a service as you believe I might have rendered you is so very doubtful, so entirely a matter of suppositions and probabilities and possibilities, that we can’t talk of it seriously. I acted as any guardian was bound to act, under the circumstances. You, on the other hand, took the course that young people have taken from time immemorial. The past is past ; it is worse than vain to revive it. Come, now, let us talk for a few minutes quietly.”

Cecily’s head was bent. He saw that her bosom heaved, but on her face there was no foreboding of tears. The strong impulse having had its way, she seemed to be recovering self-command.

"By-the-bye," he asked, "how did you know where to find me?"

"I found a letter of yours lying open. Did he answer your invitation?"

"Yes; he wrote a few lines saying he would come before long. But I haven't seen him. What do you intend to do when you leave me?"

"Go home again and wait," she answered, with quiet sadness.

"In solitude? And what assurance have you that he means to come?"

"None whatever. But where else should I go, but home? My place is there, until I have heard his pleasure."

It was mournfully unlike her, this bitter tone. Her eyes were fixed upon the picture again. Looking at her, Mallard was moved by something of the same indignant spirit that was still strong in her heart. Her pure and fine-wrought beauty, so subtle in expression of the soul's life, touched him with a sense of deepest pathos. It revolted him to think of her in connection with those

brutalities of the newspaper; he had a movement of rebellion against the undiscerning rigour of social rule. Disinterested absolutely, but he averted his face lest she should have a suspicion of what he thought.

In spite of that, he was greatly relieved to hear her purpose. He had feared other things. It was hateful that she should remain the wife of such a man as Elgar, but what refuge was open to her? The law that demands sacrifice of the noble few on behalf of the ignoble many is too swift and sure in avenging itself when defied. It was well that she had constrained herself to accept the inevitable.

"You will write this evening to Mrs. Lessingham?" he said, in a tone of assuredness.

"Why do you wish me to do that?" she asked, looking at him.

"Because of the possibility of your still being left alone. You are not able to bear that."

"Yes, I can bear anything that is necessary now," she answered firmly. "If it was

weakness to come here and say what I have said, then my weakness is over. Mrs. Lessingham is enjoying herself with friends; why should I disturb her? What have I to say to her, or to any one?"

"Suppose an indefinite time goes by, and you are still alone?"

"In that case, I shall be able to arrange my life as other such women do. I shall find occupation, the one thing I greatly need. My gravest misfortune is, that I feel the ability to do something, but do not know what. Since the death of my child, that is what has weighed upon me most."

Mallard reflected upon this. He could easily understand its truth. He felt assured that Miriam suffered in much the same way, having reached the same result by so very different a process of development. But it was equally clear to him that neither of these women really could *do* anything; it was not their function to do, but to *be*. Eleanor Spence would in all likelihood have illustrated the same unhappy problem had

it been her lot to struggle against adverse conditions ; she lived the natural life of an educated woman, and therefore was beset by no questionings as to her capacities and duties. So long, however, as the educated woman is the exceptional woman, of course it will likewise be exceptional for her life to direct itself in a calm course.

To discuss such questions with Cecily was impossible. How should he say to her, "You have missed your chance of natural happiness, and it will only be by the strangest good fortune if you ever again find yourself in harmony with fate" ? Mallard had far too much discretion to assume the part of lay preacher, and involve himself in the dangers of suggesting comfort. The situation was delicate enough, and all his efforts were directed to subduing its tone. After a pause, he said to her :

"Have you taken your meals to-day ?"

She smiled a little.

"Yes. But I am thirsty. Can you give me a glass of water ?"

“Are you *very* thirsty? Can you wait a quarter of an hour?”

With a look of inquiry as to his meaning, she answered that she could. Mallard nodded, and began to busy himself in a corner of the studio. She saw that he was lighting a spirit-lamp, and putting a kettle over it. She made no remark; it was soothing to sit here in this companionship, and feel the feverish heat in her veins gradually assuaged. Mallard kept silence, and when he saw her beginning to look around at the pictures, he threw out a word or two concerning them. She rose, to see better, and moved about, now and then putting a question. In little more than the stipulated time, tea was prepared. After a short withdrawal to the ante-room, Mallard produced some delicate slices of bread and butter. Cecily ate and drank. As it was growing dusk, the artist lit a lamp.

“You know,” she said, again turning her eyes to the pictures, “that I used to pretend to draw, to make poor little sketches.

Would there be any hope of my doing anything, not good, but almost good, if I began again and worked seriously?"

He would rather have avoided answering such a question; but perhaps the least dangerous way of replying was to give moderate approval.

"At all events, you would soon find whether it was worth while going on or not. You might take some lessons; it would be easy to find some lady quite competent to help you in the beginning."

She kept silence for a little; then said that she would think about it.

Mallard had left his seat, and remained standing. When both had been busy with their thoughts for several minutes, Cecily also rose.

"I must ask a promise from you before you go," Mallard said, as soon as she had moved. "If you are still alone to-morrow, you promise me to communicate with Mrs. Lessingham. Whether you wish to do so or not, is nothing to the point."

She hesitated, but gave her promise.

“That is enough ; your word gives me assurance. You are going straight home ? Then I will send for a cab.”

In a few minutes the cab was ready at the gate. Mallard, resolved to behave as though this were the most ordinary of visits, put on his hat and led the way downstairs. They went out into the road, and then Cecily turned to give him her hand. He looked at her, and for the first time spoke on an impulse.

“It’s a long drive. Will you let me come a part of the way with you ?”

“I shall be very glad.”

They entered the hansom, and drove off.

The few words that passed between them were with reference to Mrs. Lessingham. Mallard inquired about her plans for the summer, and Cecily answered as far as she was able. When they had reached the neighbourhood of Regent’s Park, he asked permission to stop the cab and take his leave ; Cecily acquiesced. From the pave-

ment he shook hands with her, seeing her face but dimly by the lamplight ; she said only "Thank you," and the cab bore her away.

Carried onward, with closed eyes as if in self-abandonment to her fate, Cecily thought with more repugnance of home the nearer she drew to it. It was not likely that Reuben had returned ; there would be again an endless evening of misery in solitude. When the cab was at the end of Belsize Park, she called the driver's attention, and bade him drive on to a certain other address, that of the Denyers. Zillah's letter of appeal, all but forgotten, had suddenly come to mind and revived her sympathies. Was there not some resemblance between her affliction and that of poor Madeline ? Her own life had suffered a paralysis ; helpless amid the ruin of her hopes, she could look forward to nothing but long endurance.

On arriving, she asked for Mrs. Denyer, but that lady was from home. Miss Zillah,

then. She was led into the front room on the ground floor, and waited there for several minutes.

At length Zillah came in hurriedly, excusing herself for being so long. This youngest of the Denyers was now a tall, awkward, plain girl, with a fixed expression of trouble; in talking, she writhed her fingers together and gave other signs of nervousness; she spoke in quick, short sentences, often breaking off in embarrassment. During the years of her absence from home as a teacher, Zillah had undergone a spiritual change; relieved from the necessity of sustaining the Denyer tone, she had by degrees ceased to practise affectation with herself, and one by one the characteristics of an "emancipated" person had fallen from her. Living with a perfectly conventional family, she adopted not only the forms of their faith—in which she had, of course, no choice—but at length the habit of their minds; with a profound sense of solace, she avowed her self-deceptions

and became what nature willed her to be—a daughter of the Church. The calamities that had befallen her family had all worked in this direction with her, and now that her daily life was in a sick-chamber, she put forth all her best qualities, finding in accepted creeds that kind of support which only the very few among women can sincerely dispense with.

“She has been very, very ill the last few days,” was her reply to Cecily’s inquiry. “I don’t venture to leave her for more than a few minutes.”

“Mrs. Denyer is away?”

“Yes; she is staying at Sir Roland’s, in Lincolnshire. Barbara and her husband are there, and they sent her an invitation.”

“But haven’t you a nurse?”

“I’m afraid I shall be obliged to find one.”

“Can I help you to-night? Do let me. I have only been home two days, and came in reply to your letter as soon as I could.”

They went up to Zillah’s room, and Cecily

threw aside her out-of-door clothing. Then they silently entered the sick-chamber.

Madeline was greatly changed in the short time since Cecily had seen her. Ceaseless pain had worn away the last traces of her girlish beauty; the drawn features, the deadened eyes, offered hope that an end must come before long. She gave a look of recognition as the visitor approached her, but did not attempt to speak.

"Are you easier again, dear?" Zillah asked, bending over her.

"Yes."

"Mrs. Elgar would like to stay with you a little. She won't ask you to talk."

"Very well. Go and rest whilst she stays."

"Yes, go and lie down," urged Cecily. "Please do! I will call you at once if it is necessary."

Zillah was persuaded, and Cecily took her seat alone by the bedside. She had lost all thought of herself. The tremor which possessed her when she entered was sub-

siding ; the unutterable mournfulness of this little room made everything external to it seem of small account. She knew not whether it was better to speak or remain mute, and when silence had lasted for a few minutes, she could not trust her voice to break it. But at length the motionless girl addressed her.

“Have you enjoyed yourself in Italy ?”

“Not much. I have not been very well,” Cecily answered, leaning forward.

“Did you go to Naples ?”

“Only as far as Rome.”

“How can any one be in Italy, and not go to Naples ?” said Madeline, in a low tone of wonder.

Silence came again. Cecily listened to the sound of breathing. Madeline coughed, and seemed to make a fruitless effort to speak ; then she commanded her voice.

“I took a dislike to you at Naples,” she said, with the simple directness of one who no longer understands why every thought should not be expressed. “It began when

you showed that you didn't care for Mr. Marsh's drawings. It is strange to think of that now. You know I was engaged to Mr. Marsh ?”

“ Yes.”

“ He used to write me letters ; I mean, since *this*. But it is a long time since the last came. No doubt he is married now. It would have been better if he had told me, and not just ceased to write. I want Zillah to write to him for me ; but she doesn't like to.”

“ Why do you think he is married ?” Cecily asked.

“ Isn't it natural ? I'm not so foolish as to wish to prevent him. It's nothing to me now. I should even be glad to hear of it. He ought to marry some good-natured, ordinary kind of girl, who has money. Of course you were right about his drawings ; he was no artist, really. But I had a liking for him.”

Cecily wondered whether it would be wise or unwise to tell what she knew.

The balance seemed in favour of holding her peace. In a few minutes, Madeline moaned a little.

“You are in pain?”

“That’s nothing; pain, pain—I find it hard to understand that life is anything but pain. I can’t live much longer, that’s the one comfort. Death doesn’t mean pain, but the end of it. Yesterday I felt myself sinking, sinking, and I said, ‘Now this is the end,’ and I could have cried with joy. But Zillah gave me something, and I came back. That’s cruelty, you know. They ought to help us to die, instead of keeping us alive in pain. If doctors had any sense, they would help us to die; there are so many simple ways. You see the little bottle with the blue label; look round; the little bottle with the measure near it. If only it had been left within my reach! They call it poison, when you take too much of it; but poison means sleep and rest and the end of pain.”

Cecily listened as though some one spoke

from beyond the grave ; that strange voice made all the world unreal.

“Do you believe in a life after this ?” asked Madeline, with earnestness.

“I know nothing,” was the answer.

“Neither do I. It matters nothing to me. All I have to do is to die, and then whatever comes will come. Poor Zillah does her best to persuade me that she *does* know. I shall try to seem as if I believed her. Why should I give her pain ? What does it matter if she is wrong ? She is a kind sister to me, and I shall pretend that I believe her. Perhaps she is right ? She may be, mayn’t she ?”

“She may be.”

“It’s good of you to come and sit here whilst she rests. She hasn’t gone to bed for two nights. She’s the only one of us that cares for me. Barbara has got her husband ; well, I’m glad of that. And there’s no knowing ; she might live to be Lady Musselwhite. Sir Roland hasn’t any children. Doesn’t it make you laugh ?”

She herself tried to laugh—a ghostly sound. It seemed to exhaust her. For half an hour no word was spoken. Then Cecily, who had fallen into brooding, heard herself called by a strange name.

“Miss Doran !”

She rose and bent over the bed, startled by this summons from the dead past.

“Can I do anything for you, Madeline ?”

The heavy eyes looked at her in a perplexed way. They seemed to be just awaking, and Madeline smiled faintly.

“Didn’t I call you Miss Doran ? I was thinking about you, and got confused. But you are married, of course. What is your name now ? I can’t remember.”

“Mrs. Elgar.”

“How silly of me ! Mrs. Elgar, of course. Are you happily married ?”

“Why do you ask ?”

For the first time, she remembered the possibility that the Denyers knew of her disgrace. But Madeline’s reply seemed to

prove that she, at all events, had no such thing in mind.

“I was only trying to remember whom you married. Yes, yes; you told us about it before, Or else Mrs. Travis told me.”

“What did she say?”

“Only that you had married for love, as every woman ought to. But *she* is very unhappy. Perhaps that would have been my own lot, if I had lived. I dare say I should have been married long ago. What does it matter? But as long as one is born at all, one might as well live life through, see the best as well as the worst of it. It's been all worst with me.—Oh, that's coming again! That wishing and rebelling and despairing! I thought it was all over. You stand there and look at me; that is you and this is I, this, this! I am lying here waiting for death and burial. You have the husband you love, and long years of happy life before you.—Do you feel sorry for me? Suppose it was you who lay here?”

The same question she had put to Mrs. Travis, but now spoken in a more anguished voice. The tears streamed from Cecily's eyes.

"You cry, like Zillah does when she tries to persuade me. I don't know whether I had rather be pitied, or lie quite alone. But don't cry. You shan't go away and be made miserable by thinking of me. I can bear it all well enough ; there can't be much more of it, you know. Sit down again, if you have time. Perhaps you want to go somewhere to-night—to see friends ?"

"No. I will stay with you as long as ever you wish."

Presently the conversation ceased, and then for nearly three hours Cecily listened to the sound of breathing. At length the door softly opened, and Zillah came in. She was distressed ; it had struck twelve long since, and only now had she awoke from sleep. Cecily entreated her to go and sleep again ; she herself had no desire to close her eyes.

“But what will Mr. Elgar think has become of you?”

“He is not at home to-night. Let me have my way, there’s a good girl.”

Zillah, whose eyelids would scarcely be supported, at length went back to her room. Madeline still slept, with unusual calmness. The vigil was resumed, and nothing again disturbed it until white dawn began to glimmer at the windows.

Then Madeline awoke with a sudden loud cry of anguish. Cecily, aroused from slumber which was just beginning, sprang up and spoke to her. But the cry seemed to have been the end of her power of utterance; she moved her lips and looked up fearfully. Cecily hastened to summon Zillah.





CHAPTER XIV.

SUGGESTION AND ASSURANCE.

WHEN Miriam went out by herself to walk, either going or returning she took the road in which was Mallard's studio. She kept on the side opposite the gateway, and, in passing, seemed to have no particular interest in anything at hand. A model who one day came out of the gate, and made inspection of the handsomely attired lady just going by, little suspected for what purpose she walked in this locality.

And so it befell that Miriam was drawing near to the studios at the moment when a cab stopped there, at the moment when Cecily alighted from it. Instantly recognizing her sister-in-law, Miriam thought it inevitable that she herself must be observed; for an instant her foot was

checked. But Cecily paid the driver without looking this way or that, and entered the gateway. Miriam walked on for a few paces; then glanced back and saw the cab waiting. She reached the turning of the road, and still the cab waited. Another moment, and it drove away empty.

She stood and watched it, until it disappeared in the opposite direction. Heedless of one or two people who came by, she remained on the spot for several minutes, gazing towards the studios. Presently she moved that way again. She passed the gate, and walked on to the farther end of the road, always with glances at the gate. Then she waited again, and then began to retrace her steps.

How many times, backwards and forwards? She neither knew nor cared; it was indifferent to her whether or not she was observed from the windows of certain houses. She felt no weariness of body, but time seemed endless. The longer she stood or walked, the longer was Cecily there

within. For what purpose? Yesterday she was to arrive in London; to-day she doubtless knew all that had been going on in her absence. And dusk fell, and twilight thickened. The street-lamps were lit. But Cecily still remained within.

Twice or thrice some one entered or left the studio-yard, strangers to Miriam. At length there came forth a man who, after looking about, hurried away, and in a few minutes returned with a hansom following him. Seeing that it stopped at the gateway, she approached as close as she durst, keeping in shadow. There issued two persons, whom at once she knew—Cecily with Mallard. They spoke together a moment; then both got into the vehicle and drove away.

That evening Miriam had an engagement to dine out, together with the Spences. When she reached home, Eleanor met her in the entrance-hall, dressed ready for departure and not a little impatient.

“Have you forgotten?”

"No. I am very sorry that I couldn't get back sooner. What is the time?"

It was too late for her to dress and reach her destination at the appointed hour.

"You must go without me. I hope it doesn't matter. They are not the kind of people who plan for their guests to go like the animals of Noah's ark."

This was a sally of unwonted liveliness from Miriam, and it did not suit very well with her jaded face.

"Will you come after dinner?" Eleanor asked.

"Yes, I will. Make some excuse for me."

So Miriam dined alone, or made a pretence of doing so, and at nine o'clock joined her friends. Through the evening she talked far more freely than usual, and with a frequency of caustic remark which made one or two mild ladies rather afraid of her.

At half-past nine next morning, when she and Eleanor were talking over a letter Mrs. Spence had just received from Greece, a servant came into the drawing-room to

say that Mr. Elgar wished to speak with Mrs. Baske. The ladies looked at each other; then Miriam directed that the visitor should go up to her own sitting-room.

"This has something to do with Cecily," said Eleanor, in a low voice.

"Probably."

And Miriam turned away.

As she entered her room, Reuben faced her, standing close by. He looked miserably ill, the wreck of a man compared with what he had been at his last visit. When the door was shut, he asked without preface, and in an anxious tone :

"Can you tell me where Cecily is?"

Miriam laid her hand on a chair, and met his gaze.

"Where she is?"

"She isn't at home. Haven't you heard of her?"

"Since when has she been away?"

Her manner of questioning seemed to Elgar to prove that her own surprise was as great as his.

"I only went there last night," he said, "about eleven o'clock. She had been in the house since her arrival the day before yesterday; but in the afternoon she went out, and didn't return. She left no word, and there's nothing from her this morning. I thought it likely you had heard something."

"I have heard many things, but not about *her*."

"Of course, I know that!" he exclaimed impatiently, averting his eyes for a moment. "I haven't come to talk, but to ask you a simple question. You have no idea where she is?"

Miriam moved a few steps away and seated herself. But almost at once she arose again.

"Why didn't you go home before last night?" she asked harshly.

"I tell you, I am not going to talk of my affairs," he answered, with a burst of passion. "If you want to drive me mad——! Can't you answer me? Do you know anything, or guess anything, about her?"

“Yes,” said Miriam, after some delay, speaking deliberately, “I can give you some information.”

“Then do so, and don’t keep me in torment.”

“Yesterday afternoon I happened to be passing Mr. Mallard’s studio, and I saw her enter it; she came in a cab. She stayed there an hour or two; it grew dark whilst she was there. Then I saw them both go away together.”

Elgar stared, half incredulously.

“You saw this? Do you mean that you waited about and watched?”

“Yes.”

“You had suspicions?”

“I knew what a happy home she had returned to.”

Again she seated herself.

“She went there to ask about me,” said Elgar, in a forced voice.

“You think so? Why to him? Wouldn’t she rather have come to me? Why did she stay so long? Why did he go away

with her? And why hasn't she returned home?"

Question followed question with cold deliberateness, as if the matter barely concerned her.

"But—Mallard? What is Mallard to her?"

"How can I tell?"

"Were they together much in Rome?"

"I think very likely they were."

"Miriam, I can't believe this. How could it happen that you were near Mallard's studio just then? How could you stand about for hours, spying?"

"Perhaps I dreamt it."

"Where is this studio?" he asked. "I knew the other day, but I have forgotten."

She told him the address.

"Very well, then I must go there. You still adhere to your story?"

"Why should I invent it?" she exclaimed bitterly. "And what is there astonishing in it? What right have *you* to be astonished?"

“Every right!” he answered, with violence. “What warning have I had of such a thing?”

She rose, and moved away with a scornful laugh. For a minute he looked at her as she stood apart, her face turned from him.

“If I find Mallard,” he said, “of course I shall tell him who my authority is.”

She turned.

“No ; that you will not do ! ”

“And why not ? ”

“Because I forbid you. You will not dare to mention my name in any such conversation ! Besides”—her voice fell to a tone of indifference—“if you meet him, there will be no need. You will ask your question, and that will be enough. There is very little chance of his being at the studio.”

“I see that your Puritan spirit is gratified,” he said, looking at her with fierce eyes.

“Naturally.”

He went towards the door. Miriam,

raising her eyes and following him a step or two, said sternly :

“In any case, you understand that my name is not to be spoken. Show at least some remnant of honour. Remember who I am, and don’t involve me in your degradation.”

“Have no fear. Your garment of righteousness shall not be soiled.”

When he was gone, Miriam sat for a short time alone. She had not foreseen this sequel of yesterday’s event. In spite of all the promptings of her jealous fear, she had striven to explain Cecily’s visit in some harmless way. Mean what it might, it tortured her ; but, in her ignorance of what was happening between Cecily and her husband, she tried to believe that Mallard was perhaps acting the part of reconciler—not an unlikely thing, as her better judgment told her. Now she could no longer listen to such calm suggestions. Cecily had abandoned her home, and with Mallard’s knowledge, if not at his persuasion.

She thought of Reuben with all but

hatred. He was the cause of the despair which had come upon her. The abhorrence with which she regarded his vices—no whit less strong for all her changed habits of thought—blended now with the sense of personal injury ; this only had been lacking to destroy what natural tenderness remained in her feeling towards him. Cecily she hated, without the power of condemning her as she formerly would have done. The old voice of conscience was not mute, but Miriam turned from it with sullen scorn. If Cecily declared her marriage at an end, what fault could reason find with her ? If she acted undisguisedly as a free woman, how was she to blame ? Reuben's praise of her might still keep its truth. And the unwilling conviction of this was one of Miriam's sharpest torments. She would have liked to regard her with disdainful condemnation, or a fugitive wife, a dishonoured woman. But the power of sincerely judging thus was gone. Reuben had taunted her amiss.

Presently she left her room and went to seek Eleanor. Mrs. Spence was writing; she laid down her pen, and glanced at Miriam, but did not speak.

"Cecily has left her home," Miriam said, with matter-of-fact brevity.

Eleanor stood up.

"Parted from him?"

"It seems he didn't go to the house till late last night. She had left in the afternoon, and did not come back."

"Then they have not met?"

"No."

"And had Cecily heard?"

"There's no knowing."

"Of course, she has gone to Mrs. Lessingham."

"I think not," replied Miriam, turning away.

"Why?"

But Miriam would give no definite answer. Neither did she hint at the special grounds of her suspicion. Presently she left the room as she had entered, dispirited and indisposed for talk.

Elgar walked on to the studios. He found Mallard's door, and was beginning to ascend the stairs, when the artist himself appeared at the top of them, on the point of going out. He recognized his visitor with a grim movement of brows and lips, and without speaking turned back. Reuben reached the door, which remained open, and entered. Mallard, who stood there in the ante-room, looked at him inquiringly.

"I want a few minutes' talk with you, if you please," said Elgar.

"Come in."

They passed into the studio. The last time they had seen each other was more than three years ago, at Naples; both showed something of curiosity, over and above the feelings of graver moment. Mallard, observing the signs of mental stress on Elgar's features, wondered to what they were attributable. Was the fellow capable of suffering remorse or shame to this degree? Or was it the outcome of that other affair, sheer ignoble passion? Reuben,

on his part, could not face the artist's somewhat rigid self-possession without feeling rebuked and abashed. The fact of Mallard's being here at this hour seemed all but a disproof of what Miriam had hinted, and when he looked up again at the rugged, saturnine, energetic countenance, and met the calmly austere eyes, he felt how improbable it was that this man should be anything to Cecily save a conscientious friend.

"I haven't come in answer to your invitation," Reuben began, glancing uneasily at the pictures, and endeavouring to support an air of self-respect. "Something less agreeable has brought me."

They had not shaken hands, nor did Mallard offer a seat.

"What may that be?" he asked.

"I believe you have seen my wife lately?"

"What of that?"

Mallard began to knit his brows anxiously. He put up one foot on a chair, and rested his arm on his knee.

“Will you tell me when it was that you saw her?”

“If you will first explain why you come with such questions,” returned the other, quietly.

“She has not been home since yesterday; I think that is reason enough.”

Mallard maintained his attitude for a few moments, but at length put his foot to the ground again, and repeated the keen look he had cast at the speaker as soon as that news was delivered

“When did you yourself go home?” he asked gravely.

“Late last night.”

Mallard pondered anxiously.

“Then,” said he, “what leads you to believe that I have seen Mrs. Elgar?”

“I don’t merely believe; I know that you have.”

Elgar felt himself oppressed by the artist’s stern and authoritative manner. He could not support his dignity; his limbs embarrassed him, and he was conscious of

looking like a man on his trial for ignoble offences.

“How do you know?” came from Mallard, sharply.

“I have been told by some one who saw her come here yesterday, in the late afternoon.”

“I see. No doubt, Mrs. Baske?”

The certainty of this flashed upon Mallard. He had never seen Miriam walk by, but on the instant he comprehended her doing so. It was even possible, he thought, that, if she had not herself seen Cecily, some one in her employment had made the espial for her. The whole train of divination was perfect in his mind before Elgar spoke.

“It is nothing to the purpose who told me. My wife was here for a long time, and when she went away, you accompanied her.”

“I understand.”

“That is more than I do. Will you please to explain it.”

"You are accurately informed. Mrs. Elgar came here, naturally enough, to ask if I knew what had become of you."

"And why should she come to *you*?"

"Because my letter to you lay open somewhere in your house, and she thought it possible we had been together."

Elgar reflected. Yes, he remembered that the letter was left on his table.

"And where did she go afterwards? Where did you conduct her?"

"I went rather more than half-way home with her, in the cab," replied Mallard, somewhat doggedly. "I supposed she was going on to Belsize Park."

"Then you know nothing of her reason for not doing so?"

"Nothing whatever."

Elgar became silent. The artist, after moving about quietly, turned to question him with black brows.

"Hasn't it occurred to you that she may have joined Mrs. Lessingham in the country?"

"She has taken nothing—not even a travelling-bag."

"You come, of course, from the Spences' house?"

Elgar replied with an affirmative. As soon as he had done so, he remembered that this was as much as corroborating Mallard's conjecture with regard to Miriam; but for that he cared little. He had begun to discern something odd in the relations between Miriam and Mallard, and suspected that Cecily might in some way be the cause of it.

"Did they not at once suggest that she was with Mrs. Lessingham?"

Elgar muttered a "No," averting his face.

"What *did* they suggest, then?"

"I saw only my sister," said Reuben, irritably.

"And your sister thought I was the most likely person to know of Mrs. Elgar's whereabouts?"

"Yes, she did."

"I am sorry to disappoint you," said Mallard, coldly. "I have given you all the information I can."

"All you *will*," replied Elgar, whose temper was exasperated by the firmness with which he was held at a scornful distance. He began now to imagine that Mallard, from reasons of disinterested friendship, had advised Cecily to seek some retreat, and would not disclose the secret. More than that, he still found incredible.

Mallard eyed him scornfully.

"I said 'all I *can*,' and I don't deal in double meanings. I know nothing more than I have told you. You are probably unaccustomed, of late, to receive simple and straightforward answers to your questions; but you'll oblige me by remembering where you are."

Elgar might rage inwardly, but he had no power of doubting what he heard. He understood that Mallard would not even permit an allusion to anything save the plain circumstances which had come to

light. Moreover, the artist had found a galling way of referring to the events that had brought about this juncture. Reuben was profoundly humiliated ; he had never seen himself in so paltry a light. He could have shed tears of angry shame.

“ I dare say the tone of your conversation,” he said acridly, “ was not such as would reconcile her to remaining at home. No doubt you gave her abundant causes for self-pity.”

“ I did not congratulate her on her return home ; but, on the other hand, I said nothing that could interfere with her expressed intention to remain there.”

“ She told you that she had this intention ? ” asked Reuben, with some eagerness.

“ She did.”

As in the dialogue of last evening, so now, Mallard kept the sternest control upon himself. Had he obeyed his desire, he would have scarified Elgar with savage words ; but of that nothing save harm could come. His duty was to smooth, and not to aggra-

vate, the situation. It was a blow to him to learn that Cecily had passed the night away from home, but he felt sure that this would be explained in some way that did no injury to her previous resolve. He would not admit the thought that she had misled him. What had happened, he could not with any satisfaction conjecture, but he was convinced that a few hours would solve the mystery. Had she really failed in her determination, then assuredly she would write to him, even though it were without saying where she had taken refuge. But he persisted in hoping that it was not so.

“Go back to your house, and wait there,” he added gravely, but without harshness. “For some reason best known to yourself, you kept your wife waiting for nearly two days, in expectation of your coming. I hope it was reluctance to face her. You can only go and wait. If I hear any news of her, you shall at once receive it. And if she comes, I desire to know of it as soon as possible.”

Elgar could say nothing more. He would have liked to ask several questions, but pride forbade him. Turning in silence, he went from the studio, and slowly descended the stairs. Mallard heard him pause near the foot, then go forth.

Reuben had no choice but to obey the artist's directions. He walked a long way, the exercise helping him to combat his complicated wretchedness, but at length he felt weary and threw himself into a cab.

The servant who opened the door to him said that Mrs. Elgar had been in for a few minutes, about an hour ago ; she would be back again by lunch-time.





CHAPTER XV.

PEACE IN SHOW AND PEACE IN TRUTH.

AT first so much relieved that he was able to sit down and quietly review his thoughts, Elgar could not long preserve this frame of mind ; in half an hour he began to suffer from impatience, and when the time of Cecily's return approached, he was in a state of intolerable agitation. Mallard's severity lost its force now that it was only remembered. He accused himself of having been, as always, weakly sensitive to the moment's impression. The fact remained that Cecily had spent a long time alone with Mallard, had made him the confidant of her troubles ; was it credible in human nature—the past borne in mind—that Mallard had never exceeded a passionless sympathy ? Did not Miriam say distinctly that suspicion had

been excited in her by the behaviour of the two when they were in Rome? Why had he not stayed to question his sister on that point? As always, he had lost his head, missed the essential, obeyed impulses instead of proceeding on a rational plan.

He worked himself into a sense of being grossly injured. The shame he had suffered in this morning's interviews was now a mortification. What had *he* to do with vulgar rules and vulgar judgments? By what right did these people pose as his superiors and look contemptuous rebuke? His anger concentrated itself on Cecily; the violence of jealousy and the brute instinct of male prerogative plied his brain to frenzy as the minutes dragged on. Where had she passed the night? How durst she absent herself from home, and keep him in these tortures of expectation?

At a few minutes past one she came. The library door was ajar, and he heard her admit herself with a latch-key; she would see his hat and gloves in the hall.

But instead of coming to the library she went straight upstairs; it was Cecily, for he knew her step. Almost immediately he followed. She did not stop at the drawing-room; he followed, and came up with her at the bedroom door. Still she paid no attention, but went in and took off her hat.

"Where have you been since yesterday afternoon?" he asked, when he had slammed the door.

Cecily looked at him with offended surprise—almost as she might have regarded an insolent servant.

"What right have you to question me in such a tone?"

"Never mind my tone, but answer me."

"What right have you to question me at all?"

"Every right, so long as you choose to remain in my house."

"You oblige me to remind you that the house is at least as much mine as yours. For what am I beholden to you? If it comes

to the bare question of rights between us, must meet you with arguments as coarse as your own. Do you suppose I can pretend, now, to acknowledge any authority in you? I am just as free as you are, and I owe you no account of myself."

Physical exhaustion had made her incapable of self-control. She had anticipated anything but such an address as this with which Elgar presented himself. The insult was too shameless; it rendered impossible the cold dignity she had purposed.

"What do you mean by 'free'?" he asked, less violently.

"Everything that you yourself understand by it. I am accountable to no one but myself. If I have allowed you to think that I held the old belief of a woman's subjection to her husband, you must learn that that is at an end. I owe no more obedience to you than you do to me."

"I ask no obedience. All I want to know is, whether it is possible for us to live under the same roof or not."

Cecily made no reply. Her anger had involved her in an inconsistency, yet she was not so far at the mercy of blind impulses as to right herself by taking the very course she had recognized as impossible.

"That entirely depends," added Elgar, "on whether you choose to explain your absence last night."

"In other words," said Cecily, "it can be of no significance to me where you go or what you do, but if you have a doubt about any of my movements, it at once raises the question whether you can continue to live with me or not. I refuse to admit anything of the kind. I have chosen, as you put it, to remain in your house, and in doing so I know what I accept. By what right do you demand more of me than I of you?"

"You know that you are talking absurdly. You know as well as I do the difference."

"Whatever laws I recognize, they are in myself only. As regards your claims

upon me, what I have said is the simple truth. I owe you no account. If you are not content with this, you must form whatever suppositions you will, and act as you think fit."

"That is as much as telling me that our married life is at an end. I suppose you meant that when you kindly reminded me that it was your money I have been living on. Very well. Let it be as you wish."

Cecily regarded him with resentful wonder.

"Do you dare to speak as if it were I who had brought this about?"

Reuben was not the kind of man who acts emotion and contrives scenes. Whenever it might have seemed that he did so, he was, in truth, yielding to the sudden revulsions which were characteristic of his passionate nature. In him, harshness and unreason inevitably led to a reaction in which all the softer of his qualities rose predominant. So it was now. Those last words of his were not consciously meant

to give him an opportunity of changing his standpoint. Inconstant, incapable of self-direction, at the mercy of the moment's will, he could foresee himself just as little as another could foresee him. His impetuous being prompted him to utter sincerely what a man of adroit insincerity would have spoken with calculation.

"Yes," he exclaimed, "it is you who have done most towards it!"

"By what act? what word?" she asked, in astonishment.

"By all your acts and words for the year past, and longer. You had practically abandoned me long before you went abroad. When you discovered that I was not everything you imagined, when you found faults and weaknesses in me, you began to draw away, to be cold and indifferent, to lose all interest in whatever I did or wished to do. When I was working, you showed plainly that you had no faith in my powers; it soon cost you an effort even to listen to me when I talked on the

subject. I looked to you for help, and I found none. Could I say anything? The help had to come spontaneously, or it was no use. Then you gave yourself up entirely to the child; you were glad of that excuse for keeping out of my way. If I was away from home for a day or two, you didn't even care to ask what I had been doing; that was what proved to me how completely indifferent you had become. And when you went abroad, what a pretence it was to ask me to come with you! I knew quite well that you had much rather be without me. And how did you suppose I should live during your absence? You never thought about it, never cared to think. Don't imagine I am blaming you. Everything was at an end between us, and which of us could help it? But it is as well to show you that I am not the cause of all that has happened. You have no justification whatever for this tone of offence. It is foolish, childish, unworthy of a woman who claims to think for herself."

Cecily listened with strange sensations. She knew that all this had nothing to do with the immediate point at issue, and that it only emphasized the want of nobility in Reuben's character, but, as he proceeded, there was so much truth in what he attributed to her that, in spite of everything, she could not resist a feeling of culpability. However little it really signified to her husband, it was undoubtedly true that she had made no effort with herself when she became conscious of indifference towards him. To preserve love was not in her power, but was he not right in saying that she might have done more, as a wife, to supply his defects? Knowing him weak, should she not have made it a duty to help him against himself? Had she not, as he said, virtually "abandoned" him?

Elgar observed her, and recognized the effect of his words.

"Of course," he pursued, "if you have made up your mind to be released, I have neither the power nor the will to keep you.

But you must deal plainly with me. You can't both live here and have ties elsewhere. I should have thought you would have been the first to recognize that."

"Of what ties do you speak?"

"I don't know that you have any; but you say you hold yourself free to form them."

"If I had done so, I should not be here."

"Then what objection can you have to telling me where you have been?"

How idle it was, to posture and use grandiose words! Why did she shrink from the complete submission that her presence here implied? No amount of self-assertion would do away with the natural law of which he had contemptuously reminded her, the law which distinguishes man and woman, and denies to one what is permitted to the other.

"I passed the night by a sick-bed," she replied, letting her voice drop into weariness—"Madeline Denyer's."

"Did you go there directly on leaving home?"

"No."

"Will you tell me where else you went?"

"I went first of all to see Mr. Mallard. I talked with him for a long time, and he gave me some tea. Then he came part of the way back with me. Shall I try and remember the exact spot where he got out of the cab?"

"What had you to do with Mallard, Cecily?"

"I had to tell him that my life was a failure, and to thank him for having wished to save me from this fate."

Her answers were given in a dull monotone; she seemed to be heedless of the impression they made.

"You said that to Mallard?"

"Yes. It can be nothing to me what you think of it. I had waited here till I could bear loneliness no longer; I knew I had one true friend, and I went to him."

"You behaved as no self-respecting woman could!" Elgar exclaimed passionately.

"If so," she answered, meeting his look, "the shame falls only on myself."

"That is not true! You yourself seem to be unconscious of the shame; to me it is horrible suffering. I thought you incapable of anything of the kind. I looked up to you as a high-minded woman, and I loved you for your superiority to myself."

"You loved me?" she asked, with a bitter smile.

"Yes; believe it or not, as you like. Because I was maddened by sensual passion for a creature whom I never one moment respected, how did that lessen my love for you? You complain that I kept away from you; I did so because I was still racked by that vile torment, and shrank in reverence from approaching you. You might have known me well enough to understand this. Have I not told you a thousand times that in me soul and body have lived separate

lives? Even when I seemed sunk in the lowest depths, I still loved you purely and truly; I loved you all the more because I was conscious of my brutal faults. Now you have destroyed my ideal; you have degraded yourself in my esteem. It is nothing to me now, do what you may! I can never forgive you. By doing yourself wrong, you have wronged me beyond all words!"

Cecily could not take her eyes from him. She marvelled at such emotion in him. But the only way in which it affected her own feeling was to make her question herself anxiously as to whether she had really fallen below her self-respect. Had she led Mallard to think of her with like disapproval?

Life is so simple to people of the old civilization. The rules are laid down so broadly and plainly, and the conscience they have created answers so readily when appealed to. But for these poor instructed persons, what a complex affair has morality

become ! Hard enough for men, but for women desperate indeed. Each must be her own casuist, and without any criterion save what she can establish by her own experience. The growth of Cecily's mind had removed her further and further from simplicity of thought ; this was in part the cause of that perpetual sense of weariness to which she awoke day after day. Communion with such a man as Elgar strengthened the natural tendency, until there was scarcely a motive left to which she could yield without discussing it in herself, consciously or unconsciously. Her safeguard was an innate nobleness of spirit. But it is not to every woman of brains that this is granted.

“What I did,” she said at length slowly, “was done, no doubt, in a moment of weakness ; I gave way to the need of sympathy. Had my friend been a man of less worth, he might have misunderstood me, and then I might indeed have been shamed. But I knew him and trusted him.”

“Which means, that you were false to

me in a way I never was to you. It is you who have broken the vow we made to be faithful to each other."

"I cannot read in your heart. If you still love me, it is a pity; I can give you no love in return."

He drew nearer, and looked at her despairingly.

"Cecily! when I came last night, I had a longing to throw myself at your feet, and tell you all my misery—everything, and find strength again with your help. I never feared *this*. You, who are all love and womanliness, you cannot have put me utterly from your heart!"

"I am your wife still; but I ask nothing of you, and you must not seek for more than I can give."

"Well, I too ask for nothing. But I will prove——"

She checked him.

"Don't forget your philosophy. We both of us know that it is idle to make promises of that kind."

“ You will leave London with me ? ”

“ I shall go wherever you wish.”

“ Then we will make our home again in Paris. The sooner the better. A few days, and we will get rid of everything except what we wish to take with us. I don't care if I never see London again.”

In the evening, Cecily was again at the Denyers' house. Madeline lay without power of speech, and seemed gradually sinking into unconsciousness. Mrs. Denyer had been telegraphed for ; a reply had come, saying that she would be home very soon, but already a much longer time than was necessary had passed, and she did not arrive. Zillah sat by the bed weeping, or knelt in prayer.

“ If your mother does not come,” Cecily said to her, “ I will stay all night. It's impossible for you to be left alone.”

“ She must surely come ; and Barbara too. How can they delay so long ! ”

Madeline's eyes were open, but she gave

no sign of recognition. The look upon her face was one of suffering, there was no telling whether of body or mind. Hitherto it had changed a little when Zillah spoke to her, but at length not even this sign was to be elicited. Ceeily could not take her gaze from the blank visage; she thought unceasingly of the bright, confident girl she had known years ago, and the sunny shore of Naples.

The doctor looked in at nine o'clock. He stayed only a few minutes.

At half-past ten there came loud knocking at the house-door, and the servant admitted Mrs. Denyer, who was alone. In the little room above, the two watchers were weeping over the dead girl.





CHAPTER XVI.

THE TWO FACES.

MALLARD, when he had taken leave of Cecily by Regent's Park, set out to walk homewards. He was heavy-hearted, and occasionally a fit of savage feeling against Elgar took hold of him, but his mood remained that of one who watches life's drama from a point of vantage. Sitting close by Cecily's side, he had been made only more conscious of their real remoteness from each other—of his inability to give her any kind of help. He wished she had not come to him, for he saw she had hoped to meet with warmer sympathy, and perhaps she was now more than ever oppressed with the sense of abandonment. And yet such a result might have its good ; it might teach her that she must look for support to

no one but herself. Useless to lament the necessity ; fate had brought her to the hardest pass that woman can suffer, and she must make of her life what she could. It was not the kind of distress that a friend can remedy ; though she perished, he could do nothing but stand by and sorrow.

Coming to his own neighbourhood, he did not go straight to the studio, but turned aside to the Spences' house. He had no intention of letting his friends know of Cecily's visit, but he wished to ask whether they had any news of Elgar. No one was at home, however.

The next morning, when surprised by the appearance of Elgar himself, he was on the point of again going to the Spences'. The interview over, he set forth, and found Eleanor alone. She had just learnt from Miriam what news Reuben had brought, and on Mallard's entrance she at once repeated this to him.

"I knew it," replied the artist. "The fellow has been with me."

"He ventured to come? Before or after his coming here?"

"After. I think," he added carelessly, "that Mrs. Baske suggested it to him."

"Possibly. I know nothing of what passed between them."

"Do you think Mrs. Baske has any idea on the subject?" Mallard inquired, again without special insistence.

"She spoke rather mysteriously," Eleanor replied. "When I said that Mrs. Lessingham probably could explain it, she said she thought not, but gave no reasons."

"Why should she be mysterious?"

"That is more than I can tell you. Mystery rather lies in her character, I fancy."

"Would you mind telling me whether she is in the habit of going out alone?"

Eleanor hesitated a little, surprised by the question.

"Yes, she is. She often takes a walk alone in the afternoon."

"Thank you. Never mind why I wished

to know. It throws no light on Cecily's disappearance."

They talked of it for some time, and were still so engaged when Spence came in. In him the intelligence excited no particular anxiety; Cecily had gone to her aunt, that was all. What else was to be expected when she found an empty house?

"But," remarked Eleanor, "the question remains whether or not she has heard of this scandal."

Mallard could have solved their doubts on this point, but to do so involved an explanation of how he came possessed of the knowledge; he held his peace.

It was doubtful whether Elgar would keep his promise and communicate any news he might have. Mallard worked through the day, as usual, but with an uneasy mind. In the morning, he walked over once more to the Spences', and learnt that anxieties were at end; Mrs. Baske had received a letter from her brother, in which

Cecily's absence was explained. Elgar wrote that he was making preparations for departure ; in a few days they hoped to be in Paris, where henceforth they purposed living.

He went away without seeing Miriam, and there passed more than a fortnight before he again paid her a visit. In the mean time, he had seen Spence, who reported an interview between Eleanor and Mrs. Lessingham ; nothing of moment, but illustrating the idiosyncrasies of Cecily's relative. When at length, one sunny afternoon, Mallard turned his steps towards the familiar house, it was his chance to encounter Eleanor and her husband just hastening to catch a train ; they told him hurriedly that Miriam had heard from Paris.

"Go and ask her to tell you about it," said Eleanor. "She is not going out."

Mallard asked nothing better. He walked on with a curious smile, was admitted, and waited a minute or two in the drawing-room. Miriam entered, and shook hands with him, coldly courteous, distantly dignified.

"I am sorry Mrs. Spence is not at home."

"I came to see you, Mrs. Baske. I have just met them, and heard that you have news from Paris."

"Only a note, sending a temporary address."

He observed her as she spoke, and let silence follow.

"You would like to know it—the address?" she added, meeting his look with a rather defiant steadiness.

"No, thank you. It will be enough if I know where they finally settle. You saw Mrs. Elgar before she left?"

"No."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Miriam's face was clouded. She sat very stiffly, and averted her eyes as if to ignore his remark. Mallard, who had been holding his hat and stick in conventional manner, threw them both aside, and leaned his elbow on the back of the settee.

"I should like," he said deliberately, "to

ask you a question which sounds impertinent, but which I think you will understand is not really so. Will you tell me how you regard Mrs. Elgar? I mean, is it your wish to be still as friendly with her as you once were? Or do you, for whatever reason, hold aloof from her?"

"Will you explain to me, Mr. Mallard, why you think yourself justified in asking such a question?"

In both of them there were signs of nervous discomposure. Miriam flushed a little; the artist moved from one attitude to another, and began to play destructively with a tassel.

"Yes," he answered. "I have a deep interest in Mrs. Elgar's welfare—*that* needs no explaining—and I have reason to fear that something in which I was recently concerned may have made you less disposed to think of her as I wish you to. Is it so or not?"

Her answer was uttered with difficulty.

"What can it matter how I think of her?"

“That is the point. To my mind it matters a great deal. For instance, it seems to me a deplorable thing that you, her sister in more senses than one, should have kept apart from her when she so much needed a woman’s sympathy. Of course, if you had no true sympathy to give her, there’s an end of it. But it seems to me strange that it should be so. Will you put aside conventionality, and tell me if you have any definite reason for acting as if you and she were strangers?”

Miriam was mute. Her questioner waited, observing her. At length she spoke with painful impulsiveness.

“I can’t talk with you on this subject.”

“I am very sorry to distress you,” Mallard continued, his voice growing almost harsh in its determination, “but talk of it we must, once for all. Your brother came to my studio one morning, and demanded an explanation of something about his wife which he had heard from you. He didn’t *say* that it came from you, but I have the

conviction that it did. Please to tell me if I am wrong."

She kept an obstinate silence, sitting motionless, her hands tightly clasped together on her lap.

"If you don't contradict me, I must conclude that I am right. To speak plainly, it had come to his knowledge that Mrs. Elgar—no ; I will call her Cecily, as I used to do when she was a child—that Cecily had visited my studio the evening before. You told him of that. How did you know of it, Mrs. Baske ?"

Miriam answered in a hard, forced voice.

"I happened to be passing when she drove up in a cab."

"I understand. But you also told him how long she remained, and that when she left, I accompanied her. How could you be aware of those things ?"

She seemed about to answer, but her voice failed. She stood up, and began to move away. Instantly Mallard was at her side.

"You must answer me," he said, his voice shaking. "If I detain you by force, you must answer me."

Miriam turned to face him. She stood splendidly at bay, her eyes gleaming, her cheeks bloodless, her lithe body in an attitude finer than she knew. They looked into each other's pupils, long, intensely, as if reading the heart there. Miriam's eyes were the first to fall.

"I waited till she came out again."

"You waited all that time? In the road?"

"Yes."

"And when you heard that Cecily had not returned home that night, you believed that she had left her husband for ever?"

"Yes."

Mallard drew back a little, and his voice softened.

"Forgive me for losing sight of civility. Knowing this, it was perhaps natural that you should inform your brother of it. You took it for granted that Cecily—however

unwise it was of her—had come to tell me of her resolve to leave home, and that I, as her old friend, had seen her safely to the place where she had taken refuge?”

He uttered this with a peculiar emphasis, gazing steadily into her face. Miriam dropped her eyes, and made no reply.

“You represented it to your brother in this light?” he continued, in the same tone.

She forced herself to look at him; there was awed wonder on her face.

“There is no need to answer in words. I see that I have understood you. But of course you soon learnt that you had been in part mistaken. Cecily had no intention of leaving her husband, from the first.”

Miriam breathed with difficulty. He motioned to her to sit down, but she gave no heed.

“Then why did she come to you?” fell from her lips.

“Please to take your seat again, Mrs. Baske.”

She obeyed him. He took a chair at a little distance, and answered her question.

"She came because she was in great distress, and had no friend in whom she could confide so naturally. This was a misfortune; it should not have been so. It was to *you* that she should have gone, and I am afraid it was your fault that she could not."

"My fault?"

"Yes. You had not behaved to her with sisterly kindness. You had held apart from her; you had been cold and unsympathetic. Am I unjust?"

"Can one command feelings?"

"That is to say, you *felt* coldly to her. Are you conscious of any reason? I believe religious prejudice no longer influences you?"

"No."

"Then I am obliged to recall something to your mind. Do you remember that you were practically an agent in bringing about Cecily's marriage? No doubt things would

have taken much the same course, however you had acted. But is it not true that you gave what help was in your power? You acted as though your brother's suit had your approval. And I think you alone did so."

"You exaggerate. I know what you refer to. Reuben betrayed my lack of firmness, as he betrays every one who trusts in him."

"Let us call it lack of firmness. The fact is the same, and I feel very strongly that it laid an obligation on you. From that day you should have been truly a sister to Cecily. You should have given her every encouragement to confide in you. She loved you in those days, in spite of all differences. You should never have allowed this love to fail."

Miriam kept her eyes on the floor.

"I am afraid," he added, after a pause, "that you won't tell me why you cannot think kindly of her?"

She hesitated, her lips moving uncertainly.

“There is a reason?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“I have no right to press you to do so. I will rather ask this—I asked it once before, and had no satisfactory answer—why did you allow me to think for a few days, in Italy, that you accepted my friendship and gave me yours in return, and then become so constrained in your manner to me that I necessarily thought I had given you offence?”

She was silent.

“That also you can’t tell me?”

She glanced at him—or rather, let her eyes pass over his face—with the old suggestion of defiance. Her firm-set lips gave no promise of answer.

Mallard rose.

“Then I must still wait. Some day you will tell me, I think.”

He held his hand to her, then turned away; but in a moment faced her again.

“One word—a yes or no. Do you believe what I have told you? Do you

believe it absolutely? Look at me, and answer."

She flushed, and met his gaze almost as intensely as when he compelled her confession.

"Do you put absolute faith in what I have said?"

"I do."

"That is something."

He smiled very kindly, and so this dialogue of theirs ended.

A few days later, the Spences gathered friends about their dinner-table. Mallard was of the invited. The necessity of donning society's uniform always drew many growls from him; he never felt at his ease in it, and had a suspicion that he looked ridiculous. Indeed it suited him but ill; it disguised the true man as he appeared in his rough travelling apparel, and in the soiled and venerable attire of the studio.

As he entered the drawing-room, his first glance fell on Seaborne, who sat in conversation with Mrs. Baske. The man of letters was

just returned from Italy. Going to shake hands with Miriam, Mallard exchanged a few words with him ; then he drew aside into a convenient corner. He noticed that Miriam's eyes turned once or twice in his direction. Informed that she was to be his partner in the solemn procession, he approached her when the moment arrived. They had nothing to say to each other, until they had been seated some time ; then they patched together a semblance of talk, a few formalities, commonplaces, all but imbecilities. Finding this at length intolerable, each turned to the person on the other side. In Mallard's case this was a young lady whom he had once before met, a pretty, bright, charming girl ; without hesitation, she abandoned her companion proper, and drew the artist into lively dialogue. It was continued afterwards in the drawing-room, until Mallard, observing that Miriam sat alone, went over to her.

“What's the matter ?” he asked, as he seated himself.

“The matter? Nothing.”

“I thought you looked unusually well and cheerful early in the evening. Now you are the opposite.”

“Society soon tires me.”

“So it does me.”

“You seem anything but tired.”

“I have been listening to clever and amusing talk. Do you like Miss Harper?”

“I don’t know her well enough to like or dislike her.”

Mallard was looking at her hands, as they lay folded together; he noticed a distinct tension of the muscles, a whitening of the knuckles.

“She has just the qualities to put me in good humour. Often when I have got stupid and bearish from loneliness, I wish I could talk to some one so happily constituted.”

Miriam had become mute, and in a minute or two she rose to speak to a lady who was passing. As she stood there, Mallard regarded her at his ease. She was admirably

dressed to-night; her hair seemed to be arranged in an unfamiliar way, so as to give something of a new aspect to her countenance; she looked younger than of wont. Losing sight of her, owing to people who came between, Mallard fell into a brown study, an anxious smile on his lips.

On the second morning after that, he interrupted his work to sit down and pen a short letter. "Dear Mrs. Baske," he began; then pondered, and rose to give a touch to the picture on which his eyes were fixed. But he seated himself again, and wrote on rapidly. "Would you do me the kindness to come here to-morrow early in the afternoon? If you have an engagement, the day after would do. But please do come, if you can; I wish to see you."

There came no reply to this. At the time he had mentioned, Mallard walked about his room in impatience. Just before three o'clock, his ear caught a footstep outside, and a knock at the door followed.

“Come in!” he shouted.

From behind the canvases appeared Miriam.

“Ah! How do you do? This is kind of you. Are you alone?”

The question was so indifferently asked, that Miriam stood in embarrassment.

“Yes. I have come because you asked me.”

“To be sure. — Can you sew, Mrs. Baske?”

She looked at him in confusion, half indignant.

“Yes, I can sew.”

“I hardly like to ask you, but—would you mend this for me? It’s the case in which I keep a large volume of engravings; the seams are coming undone, you see.”

He took up the article in question, which was of glazed cloth, and held it to her.

“Have you a needle and thread?” she asked.

“Oh yes; here’s a complete work-basket.”

He watched her as she drew off her gloves.

"Will you sit here?" He pointed to a chair and a little table. "I shall go on with my work, if you will let me. You don't mind doing this for me?"

"Not at all."

"Is that chair comfortable?"

"Quite."

He moved away and seemed to be busy with a picture; it was on an easel so placed that, as he stood before it, he also overlooked Miriam at her needlework. For a time there was perfect quietness. Mallard kept glancing at his companion, but she did not once raise her eyes. At length he spoke.

"I have never had an opportunity of asking you what your new impressions were of Bartles."

"The place was much the same as I left it," she answered naturally.

"And the people? Did you see all your old friends?"

"I saw no one except my sister-in-law and her family."

“ You felt no inclination ? ”

“ None whatever.”

“ By-the-bye ”—he seemed to speak half absently, looking closely at his work—
“ hadn’t you once some thought of building a large new chapel there ? ”

“ I once had.”

She drew her stitches nervously.

“ That has utterly passed out of your mind ? ”

“ Must it not necessarily have done so ? ”

He stepped back, held his head aside, and examined her thoughtfully.

“ H’m. I have an impression that you went beyond thinking of it as a possibility. Did you not make a distinct promise to some one or other—perhaps to the congregation ? ”

“ Yes, a distinct promise.”

He became silent ; and Miriam, looking up for the first time, asked :

“ Is it your opinion that the promise is still binding on me ? ”

“ Why, I am inclined to think so. Your

difficulty is, of course, that you don't see your way to spending a large sum of money to advance something with which you have no sympathy."

"It isn't only that I have no sympathy with it," broke from Miriam. "The thought of those people and their creeds is hateful to me. Their so-called religion is a vice. They are as far from being Christians as I am from being a Mahometan. To call them Puritans is the exaggeration of compliment."

Mallard watched and listened to her with a smile.

"Well," he said, soberly, "I suppose this only applies to the most foolish among them. However, I see that you can hardly be expected to build them a chapel. Let us think a moment.—Are there any public baths in Bartles?"

"There were none when I lived there."

"The proverb says that after godliness comes cleanliness. Why should you not devote to the establishing of decent baths

what you meant to set apart for the chapel ?
How does it strike you ? ”

She delayed a moment ; then—

“ I like the suggestion. ”

“ Do you know any impartial man there with whom you could communicate on such a subject ? ”

“ I think so. ”

“ Then suppose you do it as soon as possible ? ”

“ I will. ”

She plied her needle for a few minutes longer ; then looked up and said that the work was done.

“ I am greatly obliged to you. Now will you come here and look at something ? ”

She rose and came to his side. Then she saw that there stood on the easel a drawing-board ; on that was a sheet of paper, which showed drawings of two heads in crayon.

“ Do you recognize these persons ? ” he asked, moving a little away.

Yes, she recognized them. They were

both portraits of herself, but subtly distinguished from each other. The one represented a face fixed in excessive austerity, with a touch of pride that was by no means amiable, with resentful eyes and lips on the point of becoming cruel. In the other, though undeniably the features were the same, all these harsh characteristics had yielded to a change of spirit; austerity had given place to grave thoughtfulness, the eyes had a noble light, on the lips was sweet womanly strength.

Miriam bent her head, and was silent.

“Now, both these faces are interesting,” said Mallard. “Both are uncommon, and full of force. But the first I can’t say that I like. It is that of an utterly undisciplined woman, with a possibility of great things in her, but likely to be dangerous for lack of self-knowledge and humility; an ignorant woman, moreover; one subjected to superstitions, and aiming at unworthy predominance. The second is obviously her sister, but how different! An educated woman,

this ; one who has learnt a good deal about herself and the world. She is 'emancipated,' in the true sense of the hackneyed word ; that is to say, she is not only freed from those bonds that numb the faculties of mind and heart, but is able to control the native passions that would make a slave of her. Now, this face I love."

Miriam did not stir, but a thrill went through her.

"One of the passions that she has subdued," Mallard went on, "is, you can see, particularly strong in this sister of hers. I mean jealousy. This first face is that of a woman so prone to jealousy of all kinds that there would be no wonder if it drove her to commit a crime. The woman whom I love is superior to idle suspicions ; she thinks nobly of her friends ; she respects herself too much to be at the mercy of chance and change of circumstance."

He paused, and Miriam spoke humbly.

"Do you think it impossible for the first to become like her sister ?"

“Certainly not impossible. The fact is that she has already made great progress in that direction. The first face is not that of an actually existing person. She has changed much since she looked altogether like this, so much, indeed, that occasionally I see the sister in her, and then I love her for the sister’s sake. But naturally she has relapses, and they cannot but affect my love. That word, you know, has such very different meanings. When I say that I love her, I don’t mean that I am ready to lose my wits when she is good enough to smile on me. I shouldn’t dream of allowing her to come in the way of my life’s work ; if she cannot be my helper in it, then she shall be nothing to me at all. I shall never think or call her a goddess, not even if she develop all the best qualities she has. Still, I think the love is true love ; I think so for several reasons of which I needn’t speak.”

Miriam again spoke, all but raising her face.

“ You once loved in another way.”

“ I was once out of my mind, which is not at all the same as loving.”

He moved to a distance ; then returned.

“ Will you tell me now why you became so cold to Cecily ? ”

“ I was jealous of her.”

“ And still remain so ? ”

“ No.”

“ I am glad to hear that. Now I think I'll get on with my work. Thank you very much for the sewing.—By-the-bye, I often feel the want of some one at hand to do a little thing of that kind.”

“ If you will send for me, I shall always be glad to come.”

“ Thank you. Now don't hinder me any longer. Good-bye for to-day.”

Miriam moved towards the door.

“ You are forgetting your gloves, Mrs. Baske,” he called after her.

She turned back and took them up.

“ By-the-bye,” he said, looking at his watch, “ it is the hour at which ladies are

accustomed to drink tea. Will you let me make you a cup before you go ? ”

“ Thank you. Perhaps I could save your time by making it myself.”

“ A capital idea. Look, there is all the apparatus. Please to tell me when it is ready, and I’ll have a cup with you.”

He painted on, and neither spoke until the beverage was actually prepared. Then Miriam said :

“ Will you come now, Mr. Mallard ? ”

He laid down his implements, and approached the table by which she stood.

“ Do you understand,” he asked, “ what is meant when one says of a man that he is a Bohemian ? ”

“ I think so.”

“ You know pretty well what may be fairly expected of him, and what must *not* be expected ? ”

“ I believe so.”

“ Do you think you could possibly share the home of such a man ? ”

“ I think I could.”

“Then suppose you take off your hat and your mantle, or whatever it’s called, and make an experiment—see if you can feel at home here.”

She did so. Whilst laying the things aside, she heard him step up to her, till he was very close. Then she turned, and his strong arms were about her, and his strong heart beating against hers.





CHAPTER XVII.

END AND BEGINNING.

IN the autumn of this year, Mrs. Lessingham died. Owing to slight ailments, she had been advised to order her life more restfully, and with a view to this she took a house at Richmond, where Mrs. Delph and Irene again came to live with her. Scarcely was the settlement effected, when grave illness fell upon her, the first she had suffered since girlhood. She resented it; her energies put themselves forth defiantly; two days before her death she had no suspicion of what was coming. Warned at length, she made her will, angrily declined spiritual comfort, and with indignation fought her fate to the verge of darkness.

Cecily and her husband arrived a few hours too late; when the telegram of

summons reached them, they were in Denmark. The Spences attended the funeral. Mallard and Miriam, who were in the north of Scotland—they had been married some two months—did not come. By Mrs. Lessingham's will, the greater part of her possessions fell to Cecily; there was a legacy of money to Irene Delph, and a London hospital for women received a bequest.

Eleanor wrote to Miriam:

“They went back to Paris yesterday. I had Cecily with me for one whole day, but of herself she evidently did not wish to speak, and of course I asked no questions. Both she and her husband looked well, however. It pleased me very much to hear her talk of you; all her natural tenderness and gladness came out; impossible to imagine a more exquisite sincerity of joy. She is a noble and beautiful creature; I do hope that the shadow on her life is passing away, and that we shall see her become as strong as she is lovable. She said she had

written to you. Your letter at the time of your marriage was a delight to her.

“It happened that on the day when she was here we had a visit from—whom think you? Mr. Bradshaw, accompanied by his daughter Charlotte and her husband. The old gentleman was in London on business, and had met the young people, who were just returning from their honeymoon. He is still the picture of health, and his robust, practical talk seemed to do us good. How he laughed and shouted over his reminiscences of Italy! Your marriage had amazed him; when he began to speak of it, it was in a grave, puzzled way, as if there must be something in the matter which required its being touched upon with delicacy. The substitution of baths for a chapel at Bartles obviously gave him more amusement than he liked to show; he chuckled inwardly, with a sober face. ‘What has Mallard got to say to that?’ he asked me aside. I answered that it met with your husband’s entire approval. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘I feel

that I can't keep up with the world ; in my day, you didn't begin married life by giving away half your income. It caps me, but no doubt it's all right.' Mrs. Bradshaw, by-the-bye, shakes her head whenever you are mentioned.

"You will like to hear of Mr. and Mrs. Marsh. Charlotte is excessively plain, and I am afraid excessively dull, but it is satisfactory to see that she regards her husband as a superior being, not to be spoken of save with bated breath. Mr. Marsh is rather too stout for his years, and I should think very self-indulgent ; whenever his wife looks at him, he unconsciously falls into the attitude of one who is accustomed to snuff incense. He speaks of 'my Bohemian years' with a certain pride, wishing one to understand that he was a wild, reckless youth, and that his present profound knowledge of the world is the result of experiences which do not fall to the lot of common men. With Cecily he was superbly gracious—talked to her of art

in a large, fluent way, the memory of which will supply Edward with mirth for some few weeks. The odd thing is that his father-in-law seems more than half to believe in him."

Time went on. Cecily's letters to her friends in England grew rare. Writing to Eleanor early in the spring, she mentioned that Irene Delph, who had been in Paris since Mrs. Lessingham's death, was giving her lessons in painting, but said she doubted whether this was anything better than a way of killing time. "You know Mr. Seaborne is here?" she added. "I have met him two or three times at Madame Courbet's, whom I was suprised to find he has known for several years. She translated his book on the revolutions of '48 into French."

Never a word now of Elgar. The Spences noted this cheerlessly, and could not but remark a bitterness that here and there revealed itself in her short, dry letters. To Miriam she wrote only in the form of replies, rarely even alluding to her own

affairs, but always with affectionate interest in those of her correspondent.

Another autumn came, and Cecily at length was mute ; the most pressing letters obtained no response. Miriam wrote to Reuben, but with the same result. This silence was unbroken till winter ; then, one morning in November, Eleanor received a note from Cecily, asking her to call as soon as she was able at an address in the far west of London—nothing more than that.

In the afternoon, Eleanor set out to discover this address. It proved to be a house in a decent suburban road. On asking for Mrs. Elgar, she was led up to the second floor, and into a rather bare little sitting-room. Here was Cecily, alone.

“I knew you would come soon,” she said, looking with an earnest, but not wholly sad, smile at her visitor. “I had very nearly gone to you, but this was better. You understand why I am here ?”

“I am afraid so, after your long silence.”

“Don’t let us get into low spirits about

it," said Cecily, smiling again. "All that is over ; I can't make myself miserable any more, and certainly don't wish any one to be so on my account. Come and sit nearer the fire. What a black, crushing day !"

She looked out at the hopeless sky, and shook her head.

"You have lodgings here?" asked Eleanor, watching the girl with concern.

"Irene and her mother live here ; they were able to take me in for the present. He left me a month ago. This time he wrote and told me plainly—said it was no use, that he wouldn't try to deceive me any longer. He couldn't live as I wished him to, so he would have done with pretences and leave me free. I waited there in my 'freedom' till the other day ; he might have come back, in spite of everything, you know. But at last I wrote to an address he had given me, and told him I was going to London—that I accepted his release, and that henceforth all his claims upon me must be at end."

“Is he in Paris?”

“In the south of France, I believe. But that is nothing to me. What I inherited from my aunt makes me independent; there is no need of any arrangements about money, fortunately. I dare say he foresaw this when he expressed a wish that I should keep this quite apart from our other sources of income, and manage it myself.”

Eleanor felt that the last word was said. There was no distress in Cecily's voice or manner, nothing but the simplicity of a clear decision, which seemed to carry with it hardly a regret.

“A tragedy can go no further than its fifth act,” Cecily pursued. “I have shed all my tears long since, exhausted all my indignation. You can't think what an everyday affair it has become with me. I am afraid that means that I am in a great measure demoralized by these experiences. I can only hope that some day I shall recover my finer feeling.”

“You haven't seen Miriam?”

“No, and I don’t know whether I can. There is no need for you to keep silence about me when you see her; what has happened can’t be hidden. I thought it possible that Reuben might have written and told her. If she comes here, I shall welcome her, but it is better for me not to seek her first.”

“If he writes to her,” asked Eleanor, with a grave look, “is it likely that he will try to defend himself?”

“I understand you. You mean, defend himself by throwing blame of one kind or another on me. No, that is impossible. He has no desire to do that. What makes our relations to each other so hopeless, is that we can both be so coldly just. In me there is no resentment left, and in him no wish to disguise his own conduct. We are simply nothing to each other. I appreciate all the good in him and all the evil; and to him my own qualities are equally well known. We have reached the point of studying each other in a mood of scientific

impartiality—surely the most horrible thing in man and wife.”

Eleanor had a sense of relief in hearing that last comment. For the tone of the speech put her painfully in mind of that which characterizes certain French novelists—all very well in its place, but on Cecily’s lips an intolerable discord. It was as though the girl’s spirit had been materialized by Parisian influences ; yet the look and words with which she ended did away with, or at least mitigated, that fear.

“He is pursued by a fate,” murmured the listener.

“Listen to my defence,” said Cecily, after a pause, with more earnestness. “For I have not been blameless throughout. Before we left London, he charged me with contributing to what had befallen us, and in a measure he was right. He said that I had made no effort to keep him faithful to me ; that I had watched the gulf growing between us with indifference, and allowed him to take his own course.

A jealous and complaining wife, he said, would have behaved more for his good. Hearing this, I recognized its truth. I had held myself too little responsible. When our life in Paris began, I resolved that I would accept my duties in another spirit. I did all that a wife can do to strengthen the purer part in him. I interested myself in whatever he undertook ; I suggested subjects of study which I thought congenial to him, and studied them together with him, putting aside everything of my own for which he did not care. And for a time I was encouraged by seeming success. He was grateful to me, and I found my one pleasure in this absolute devotion of myself. I choose my words carefully ; you must not imagine that there was more in either his feeling or mine than what I express. But it did not last more than six months. Then he grew tired of it. I still did my utmost ; believe that I did, Mrs. Spence, for it is indeed true. I made every effort in my power to prevent what I knew was threaten-

ing. Until he began to practise deceit, trickery of every kind. What more could I do? If he was determined to deceive me, he would do so; what was gained by my obliging him to exert more cunning? Then I turned sick at heart, and the end came."

"But, Cecily," said Eleanor, "how can the end be yet?"

"You mean that he will once more wish to return."

"Once more, or twenty times more."

"I know; but——"

She broke off, and Eleanor did not press her to continue.

It was not long before the news reached Miriam. In a few days, Eleanor paid one of her accustomed visits to a little house out at Roehampton, externally cold and bare enough in these days of November, but inwardly rich with whatsoever the heart or brain can desire. Hither came no payers of formal calls, no leavers of cards, no pests from the bourgeois world to open their

mouths and utter foolishness. It was a dwelling sacred to love and art, and none were welcome across its threshold save those to whom the consecration was of vital significance. To Eleanor the air seemed purer than that of any other house she entered ; to breathe it made her heart beat more hopefully, gave her a keener relish of life.

Mallard was absent to-day, held by business in London. The visitor had, for once, no wish to await his return. She sat for an hour by the fireside, and told what she had to tell ; then took her leave.

When the artist entered, Miriam was waiting for him by the light of the fire ; blinds shut out the miserable gloaming, but no lamp had yet been brought into the room. Mallard came in, blowing the fog and rain off his moustache ; he kicked off his boots, kicked on his slippers, and then bent down over the chair to the face raised in expectancy.

“ A damnable day, Miriam, in the strict and sober sense of the word.”

"Far too sober," she replied. "Eleanor came through it, however."

"Wonderful woman! Did she come to see if you bore it with the philosophy she approves?"

"She had a more serious purpose, I'm sorry to say. Cecily is in London. He has left her—written her a good-bye."

Mallard leaned upon the mantelpiece, and watched his wife's face, illumined by the firelight. A healthier and more beautiful face than it had ever been; not quite the second of those two faces that Mallard drew, but with scarcely a record of the other. They talked in subdued voices. Miriam repeated all that Eleanor had been able to tell.

"You must go and see her, of course," Mallard said.

"Yes; I will go to-morrow."

"Shall you ask her to come here?"

"I don't think she will wish to," answered Miriam.

"That brother of yours!" he growled.

"Isn't it too late even to feel angry with

him, dear ? We know what all this means. It is absolutely impossible for them to live together, and Reuben's behaviour is nothing but an assertion of that. Sooner or later, it would be just as impossible, even if he preserved the decencies."

"Perhaps true ; perhaps not. Would it be possible for him to live for long with *any* woman ?"

Miriam sighed.

"Well, well ; go and talk to the poor girl, and see if you can do anything. I wish she were an artist, of whatever kind ; then it wouldn't matter much. A woman who sings, or plays, or writes, or paints, can live a free life. But a woman who is nothing but a woman, what the deuce is to become of her in this position ? What would become of *you*, if I found you in my way, and bade you go about your business ?"

"We are not far from the Thames," she answered, looking at him with the fire-glow in her deep, loving eyes.

"Oh, you !" he muttered, with show of

contempt. "But other women have more spirit. They get over their foolish love, and then find that life in earnest is just beginning."

"I shall never get over it."

"Pooh!—How long to dinner, Miriam?"

Miriam went to see her sister-in-law, and repeated the visit at intervals during the next few months; but Cecily would not come to Roehampton. Neither would she accept the invitations of the Spences, though Eleanor was with her frequently, and became her nearest friend. She seemed quite content with the society of Irene and Mrs. Delph; her health visibly improved, and as spring drew near there was a brightening in her eyes that told of thoughts in sympathy with the new-born hope of earth.

The Mallards were seldom in town. Excepting the house at Chelsea, their visits were only to two or three painters, who lived much as Mallard had done before his marriage. In these studios Miriam at first inspired a little awe; but as her understanding of the art-world increased, she

adapted herself to its habits in so far as she could respect them, and where she could not, the restraint of her presence was recognized as an influence towards better things.

At the Spences', one day of April, they met Seaborne. They had heard of his being in London again (after a year mostly spent in Paris), but had not as yet seen him. He was invited to visit them, and promised to do so before long. A month or more passed, however, and the promise remained unfulfilled. At Chelsea the same report was made of him ; he seemed to be living in seclusion.

In mid-May, as Miriam was walking by herself at a little distance from home, she was overtaken by a man who had followed her over the heath. When the step paused at her side, she turned and saw Reuben.

"Will you speak to me?" he said.

"Why not, Reuben?"

She gave him her hand.

"That is kinder than I hoped to find you. But I see how changed you are. You are

so happy that you can afford to be indulgent to a poor devil."

"Why have you made yourself a poor devil?"

"Why, why, why! Pooh! Why is anything as it is? Why are you what you are, after being what you were?"

It pained her to look at him. At length she discerned unmistakably the fatal stamp of degradation. When he came to her two years ago, his face was yet unbranded; now the darkening spirit declared itself. Even, his clothing told the same tale, in spite of its being such as he had always worn.

"Where are you living?" she asked.

"Anywhere; nowhere. I have no home."

"Why don't you make one for yourself?"

"It's all very well for you to talk like that. Every one doesn't get a home so easily.—Does old Mallard make you a good husband?"

"Need you ask that?" Miriam returned, averting her eyes, and walking slowly on.

"You have to thank me for it, Miriam, in part."

She looked at him in surprise.

"It's true. It was I who first led him to think about you, and interested him in you. We were going from Pompeii to Sorrento—how many years ago? thirty, forty?—and I talked about you a great deal. I told him that I felt convinced you could be saved, if only some strong man would take you by the hand. It led him to think about you; I am sure of it."

Miriam had no reply to make. They walked on.

"I didn't come to the house," he resumed presently, "because I thought it possible that the door might be shut in my face. Mallard would have wished to do so."

"He wouldn't have welcomed you; but you were free to come in if you wished."

"Have you thought it likely I might come some day?"

"I expected, sooner or later, to hear from you."

He had a cane, and kept slashing with it at the green growths by his feet. When he

missed his aim at any particular object, he stopped and struck again, more fiercely.

"Does Cecily come to see you?" was his next question, uttered as if unconcernedly.

"No."

"But you know about her? You know where she is?"

"Yes."

"Tell me what you know, Miriam. How is she living?"

"I had much rather not speak of her. I don't feel that I have any right to."

"Why not?" he asked quickly, standing still. "What is there to hide? Why had you rather not speak?"

"For reasons that you understand well enough. What is it to you how she lives?"

He searched her face, like one suspecting a studied ambiguity. His eyes, which were a little bloodshot, grew larger and more turbid; a repulsive animalism came out in all his features.

"Do tell me what you know, Miriam," he pleaded. "Of course it's nothing to me; I

know that. I have no wish to interfere with her ; I promise you to do nothing of the kind ; I promise solemnly ! ”

“ You promise ? ” she exclaimed, not harshly, but with stern significance. “ How can you use such words ? Under what circumstances could I put faith in a promise of yours, Reuben ? ”

He struck violently at the trunk of a tree, and his cane broke ; then he flung it away, still more passionately.

“ You’re right enough. What do I care ? I lie more often than I tell the truth. I have a sort of pride in it. If a man is to be a liar, let him be a thorough one.—Do you know why I smashed the stick ? I had a devilish temptation to strike you across the face with it. That would have been nice, wouldn’t it ? ”

“ You had better go your own way, Reuben, and let me go mine.”

She drew apart, and not without actual fear of him, so brutal he looked, and so strangely coarse had his utterance become.

"You needn't be afraid. If I *had* hit you, I'd have gone away and killed myself; so perhaps it's a pity I didn't. I felt a savage hatred of you, and just because I wanted you to take my hand and be gentle with me. I suppose you can't understand that? You haven't gone deep enough into life."

His voice choked, and Miriam saw tears start from his eyes.

"I hope I never may," she answered gently. "Have done with all that, and talk to me like yourself, Reuben."

"Talk! I've had enough of talking. I want to rest somewhere, and be quiet."

"Then come home with me."

"Dare you take me?"

"There's no question of daring. Come with me, if you wish to."

They walked to the house almost in silence. It was noon; Mallard was busy in his studio. Having spoken a word with him, Miriam rejoined her brother in the sitting-room. He had thrown himself on

a couch, and there he lay without speaking until luncheon-time, when Mallard's entrance aroused him. The artist could not be cordial, but he exercised a decent hospitality.

In the afternoon, brother and sister again sat for a long time without conversing. When Reuben began to speak, it was in a voice softened by the influences of the last few hours.

"Miriam, there's one thing you will tell me; you won't refuse to. Is she still living alone?"

"Yes."

"Then there is still hope for me. I must go back to her, Miriam. No—listen to me! That is my one and only hope. If I lose that, I lose everything. Down and down, lower and lower into bestial life—that's my fate, unless she saves me from it. Won't you help me? Go and speak to her for me, dear sister, you can't refuse me that. Tell her how helpless I am, and implore her to save me, only out of pity. I don't care how mean it makes me in your eyes or hers; I

have no self-respect left, nor courage—nothing but a desire to go back to her and ask her to forgive me.”

Miriam could scarcely speak for shame and distress.

“It is impossible, Reuben. Be man enough to face what you have brought on yourself. Have you no understanding left? With her, there is no hope for you. She and you are no mates; you can only wreck each other’s lives. Surely, surely you know this by now! She could only confirm your ruin, strive with you as she might; you would fall again into hateful falsity. Forget her, begin a life without thought of her, and you may still save yourself—yourself; no one else can save you. Begin the struggle alone, man-like. You have no choice but to do so.”

“I tell you I can’t live without her. Where is she? I will go myself——”

“You will never know from me. What right have you to ask her to sink with you? That’s what it means. There are people

who think that a wife's obligation has no bounds, that she *must* sink, if her husband choose to demand it. Let those believe it who will. What motive should render such a sacrifice possible to her? You know she cannot love you. Pity? How can she pity you in such a sense as to degrade herself for your sake? Neither you nor she nor I hold the creed that justifies such martyrdom. Am *I* to teach you such things? Shame! Have the courage of your convictions. You have released her, and you must be content to leave her free. The desire to fetter her again is ignoble, dastardly!"

He would neither be shamed nor convinced. With desperate beseechings, with every argument of passion, no matter how it debased him, he strove frantically to subdue her to his purpose. But Miriam was immovable. At length she could not even urge him with reasonings; his prostrate frenzy revolted her, and she drew away in repugnance. Reuben's supplication turned on the instant into brutal rage.

“Curse your obstinacy!” he shouted, in a voice that had strained itself to hoarseness.

The door opened, and Mallard, who had come to see whether Elgar was still here, heard his exclamation.

“Out of the house!” he commanded sternly. “March! And never let me see you here again.”

Reuben rushed past him, and the house-door closed violently.

Then Miriam’s overstrung nerves gave way, and for the first time Mallard saw her shed tears. She described to him the scene that had passed.

“What ought I to do? She must be warned. It is horrible to think that he may find her, and persuade her.”

They agreed that she should go to Cecily early next morning. In the mean time, she wrote to Eleanor.

But the morning brought a letter from Reuben, of a tenor which seemed to make it needless to mention this incident to Cecily.

“I had not long left you,” he wrote,

“when I recovered my reason, and recognized your wisdom in opposing me. For a week I have been drinking myself into a brutal oblivion, or trying to do so ; I came to you in a nerveless and half-imbecile state. You were hard with me, but it was just what I needed. You have made me understand—for to-day, at all events—the completeness of my damnation. Thank you for discharging that sisterly office. I observe, by-the-bye, that Mallard’s influence is strengthening your character. Formerly you were often rigorous, but it was spasmodic. You can now persevere in pitilessness, an essential in one who would support what we call justice. Don’t think I am writing ironically. Whenever I am free from passion, as now—and that is seldom enough—I can see myself precisely as you and all those on your side of the gulf see me. The finer qualities I once had survive in my memory, but I know it is hopeless to try and recover them. I find it interesting to study the processes of my

degradation. I should like to write a book about it, but it would be of the kind that no one would publish.

“I hope I may never by chance see Cecily ; I have a horrible conviction that I should kill her. Why shouldn't I tell you all the truth ? My feeling towards her is a strange and vile compound of passions, but I believe that hatred predominates. If she were so unfortunate as to come again into my power, I should make it my one object to crush her to my own level ; and in the end I should kill her. Perhaps that is the destined close of our drama. Even to you, as I confessed, I felt murderous impulses. I haven't yet been quite successful in analyzing this state of mind. The vulgar would say that, having chosen the devil's part, I am receiving a share of the devil's spirit. But to give a thing a bad name doesn't help one to understand it.

“Don't let this terrify you. I am going away again, to be out of reach of temptation. I know, I know with certainty, that the end

in some form or other draws near. I have thought so much of Fate, that I seem to have got an unusual perception of its course, as it affects me. Keep this letter as a piece of curious human experience. It may be the last you receive from me."

Something less than a month after this, Edward Spence, examining his correspondence at the breakfast-table, found a French newspaper, addressed to him in a hand he recognized.

"This is from Seaborne," he said to Eleanor, as he drew off the wrapper.

He discovered a marked paragraph. It reported a tragic occurrence in a street near the Luxembourg. The husband of an actress at one of the minor theatres in Paris had encountered his wife's lover, and shot him dead. The victim was "un jeune Anglais, nommé Elgare."

The sender of this newspaper had also written; his letter contained fuller details. He had seen the corpse, and identified it.

Could he do anything? Or would some friend of Mrs. Elgar come over?

Eleanor carried the intelligence first of all to Roehampton. In her consultation with the Mallards, it was decided that she, rather than Miriam, should visit Cecily. She left them with this purpose.

It was possible that Cecily had already heard. On arriving at the house, Eleanor was at once admitted, and went up to the sitting-room on the second floor; she entered with a tremulous anxiety, and the first glance told her that her news had not been anticipated. Cecily was seated with several books open before her; the smile of friendly welcome slowly lighting her grave countenance, showed that her mind detached itself with difficulty from an absorbing subject.

"Welcome always," she said, "and most so when least expected."

The room was less bare than when she first occupied it. Pictures and books were numerous; the sunlight fell upon an open piano; an easel, on which was a charcoal

drawing from a cast, stood in the middle of the floor. But the plain furniture remained, and no mere luxuries had been introduced. It was a work-room, not a boudoir.

"You are still content in your hermitage?" said Eleanor, seating herself and controlling her voice to its wonted tone.

"More and more. I have been reading since six o'clock this morning, and never felt so quiet in mind."

Her utterance proved it; she spoke in a low, sweet voice, its music once more untroubled. But in looking at Eleanor, she became aware of veiled trouble on her countenance.

"Have you come only to see me? Or is there something——?"

Eleanor broke the news to her. And as she spoke, the beautiful face lost its calm of contemplation, grew pain-shadowed, stricken with pangs of sorrow. Cecily turned away and wept—wept for the past, which in these moments had lived again and again perished.

It seemed to Spence that his wife mourned unreasonably. A week or more had passed, and yet he chanced to find her with tears in her eyes.

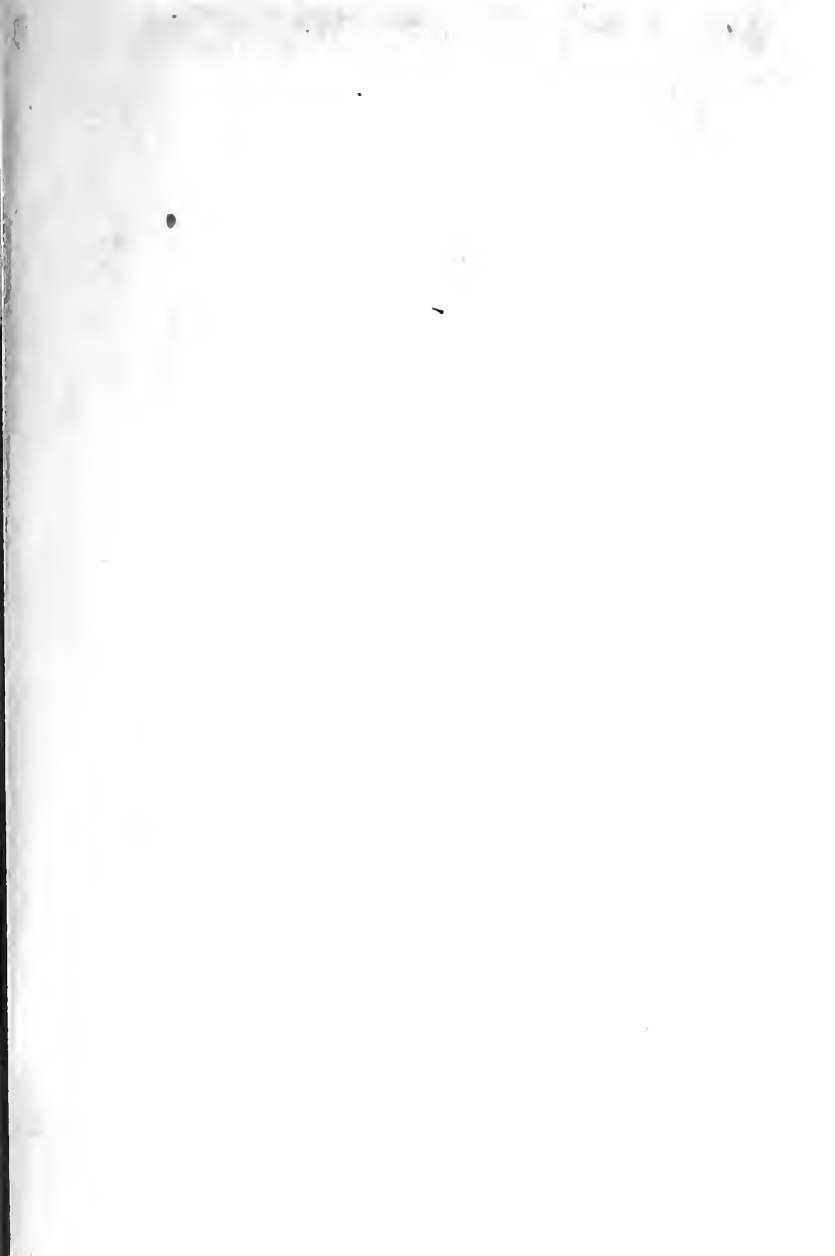
“I have still so much of the old Eve in me,” replied Eleanor. “I am heavy-hearted, not for him, but for Cecily’s dead love. We all have a secret desire to believe love imperishable.”

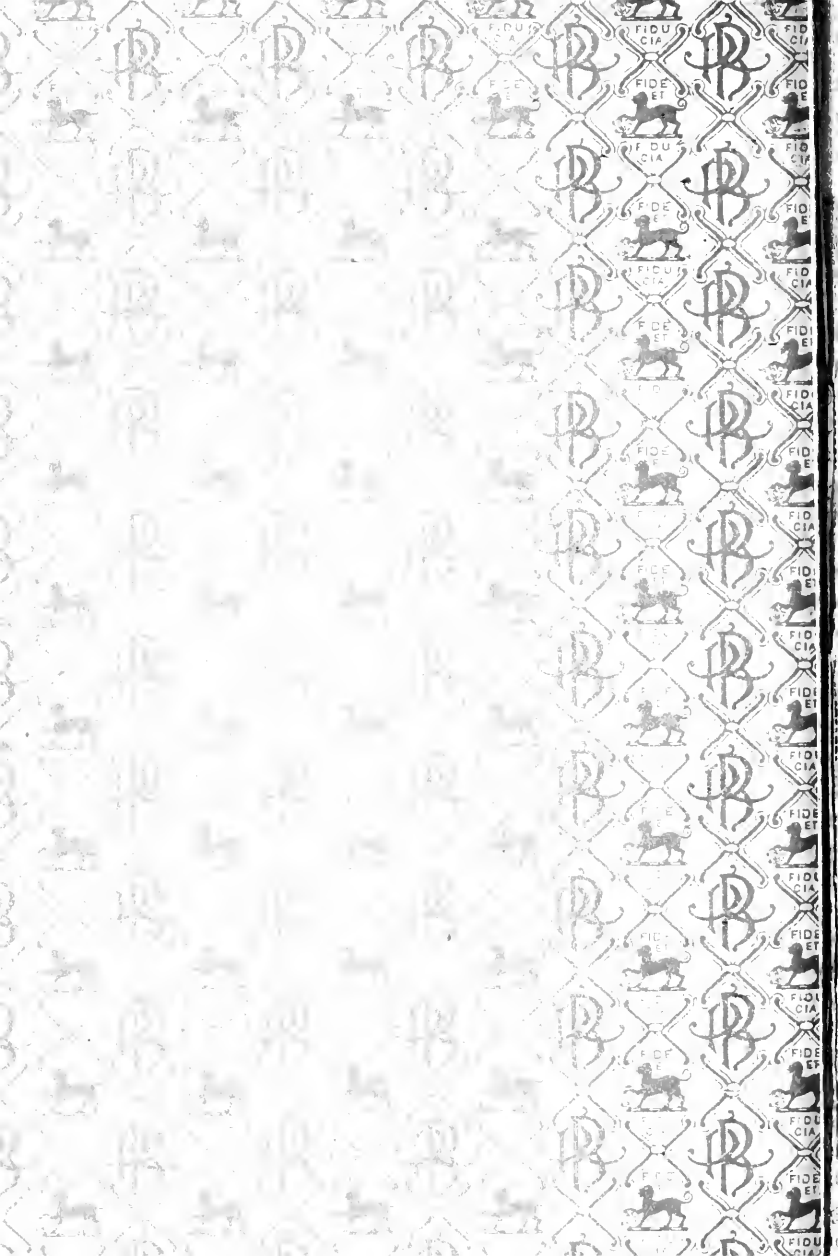
“An amiable sentiment ; but it is better to accept the truth.”

“True only in some cases.”

“In many,” said Spence, with a smile. “First love is fool’s paradise. But console yourself out of Boccaccio. ‘*Bocca baciata non perde ventura ; anzi rinnuova, come fa la luna.*’ ”

THE END.





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